

*Hypothesis and Theory*

## **Feldenkrais Method® and health: Phenomenological perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

Somatic practices share with phenomenology an interest in the body as lived and experienced. The Feldenkrais Method® is a form of somatic education that develops awareness through movement. It contributes to rehabilitation for people dealing with injury and illness, but it may also contribute to an overall shift to a more healthful (or salutogenic) orientation in life.

This paper describes the Feldenkrais Method, and explores the phenomenology of embodiment as it emerges from the practice of the Feldenkrais Method, including the following themes: the effect of somatic practice on the experience of *being-in-the-world* through shifts in perception and bodily disposition; the body in its world; action, function and practical bodily engagements; the experience of being a bodily subject and having a physical body; health, awareness, and the *how* of how the body *appears* in consciousness. It posits that a *positive felt-appearance* of the body to direct experience, different from the 'dys-appearance' of the body in illness, is both possible and useful for human health.

This paper explores how somatic practices such as the Feldenkrais Method may contribute to health through the development of somatic awareness, how the experience of health can involve mood (feelings, situation, and reflexivity), the idea of developing a healthful, or salutogenic orientation, and how somatic practices help form bodily intentionality, and an intentional arc toward health.

It suggests that there are interesting commonalities between phenomenological practice and the Feldenkrais Method. In addition, insights from phenomenological literature on movement, the body, and illness can provide useful insights, images, and frameworks for the investigation and discussion of the Feldenkrais Method in relation to health.

### **Keywords**

Feldenkrais Method, somatics, phenomenology, embodiment, health



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### **Introduction**

This paper concerns how somatic practices contribute to human health, and how phenomenological perspectives and practices may contribute to the study of these phenomena. The study of somatics has much in common with the concerns of phenomenology in terms of the emphasis on lived, bodily experience as an essential aspect of our *being-in-the-world*.

Drawing on his studies of existential philosophy, Hanna (1970, 1976) described the field of somatics as that which is concerned with the study of the living body, as distinct from the corpse-like Cartesian body, and the practices associated with the discovery and development of bodily experience. Somatic practices have the potential to allow for a disciplined exploration of bodily being through the systematic attention to the bodily experiences of intention, movement, and perception in action (Morley 2008: 144-163).

The Feldenkrais Method is one form of self-education that develops bodily awareness through movement (Feldenkrais 1972; Smyth 2012). The form of education is one of experiential learning. It is based in Feldenkrais's idea of *organic learning*, as distinct from forms of social, cognitive, or academic learning (Feldenkrais 1981; Sharfarman 1997). Feldenkrais (1981) wrote,

Organic learning begins in the womb and continues during the whole of the individual's period of physical growth. ... Organic learning is individual, and without a teacher who is striving for results within a certain time, it lasts as long as the learner keeps at it. This organic learning is slow, and unconcerned with any judgment as to the achievement of good or bad results. It has no obvious purpose or goal. It is guided only by the sensation of satisfaction when each attempt feels less awkward as the result of avoiding a former minor error which felt unpleasant or difficult (29–30).

Feldenkrais notes that, while scholastic learning is one of our greatest achievements, it can interfere with the kind of organic, experiential learning he describes. Scholastic learning is

always incomplete in some ways due to faulty teaching and impact of social expectations. Learning focused on the use of willpower, on cognitive achievement and standardized content, and oriented toward extrinsic ends can undermine the individual's interests and motivations, and frustrate the integration of learning and personal development. Feldenkrais developed his approach, which uses principles of organic learning (such as sensory-motor integration, self-observation and correction, and curiosity) to assist people to find a greater capacity to function in the world in more integral ways and overcome limitations of formal education (Feldenkrais 1981).

The Feldenkrais Method is predicated on the assumption that a large proportion of our experience of our self is of our bodily movement in the world. Feedback from our self-movement comes through the muscles and joints, and also through the stretch receptors in our largest single organ, the skin. In addition, on a neurological level, there is a lot of activation that is not only sensory feedback, but also significantly the efferent activity (feed-forward) associated with creating movement using the largest organ system of the body, the musculoskeletal system. In this way, 'bodily self-consciousness would correspond to a *predicted* sense of self' (Legrand 2011:105).

The Feldenkrais Method can be seen as an awareness practice that can change the ways people experience themselves, their bodies, and their world. However, much of the research into the Method so far has been outcome studies of its application in the field of rehabilitation. A common perception of the Feldenkrais Method is that it is for people dealing with physical challenges and pain, yet many students report that the Method contributes to their overall sense of well being and the adoption of behaviors that are more healthful, or *salutogenic* (Antonovsky 1979,1987; Deusing 2008: 48-54; Smyth 2012).

This paper argues that more research is needed into the Feldenkrais Method, and suggests that phenomenological approaches would be particularly valuable to gain a better understanding of the nature of the *lived experience* of the Method, and its contribution to health.

A number of authors have suggested that phenomenologically-informed research has much to offer the study of somatic practices (Bhenke 2001:94-117; Braude 2015; Fraleigh, 2015: xix–xxxii, 2016 [this volume], Hanlon-Johnson 2004:105-121; Smyth 2012). Phenomenology asks the researcher to go beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of phenomena, such as those assumptions arising in everyday life (e.g. expressed in distinctions in commonplace language) or from the natural sciences, which often take phenomena as given or operationalized without reflection on the underlying nature of a phenomenon and how it is constituted in consciousness. One result of this openness is that there is a rich literature of the importance of the body, bodily experience, and self-movement in phenomenological literature going back to the founder of phenomenological thought, Husserl (1989), through to contemporary thinkers such as Sheets-Johnstone (1998).

## **Feldenkrais Method**

The Feldenkrais Method has been applied in the area of improved performance, for example, with dancers, athletes, singers, and actors. Its other main area of application is in functional rehabilitation for people dealing with injuries, neurological conditions, illness, chronic pain, and stress. Many students or clients attend classes or visit practitioners initially to deal with issues of movement and pain, but continue to study or practice the Method for greater physical flexibility and bodily ease, improved sleep, stress management, relaxation, and improved body image. The Feldenkrais Method functions in many people's lives like practices such as Tai Chi, Qigong, and Yoga, but it does not have an explanatory system based on the concept of energy, nor any explicit spiritual philosophy, imagery, or practices. Its development was based at least on (a) physics, anatomy and physiology, (b) the neuroscience of movement, perception and cognition, (c) learning theories, (d) martial arts practice, particularly Judo, and (e) mind-body practices (such as autosuggestion, autogenics, and hypnosis). Explanations coming from information processing theories, cybernetics, dynamical systems theory, biophysics, and the biology of cognition (especially neurophenomenological approaches), are now also applied to conceptualizing the Method (Buchanan and Ulrich 2002; Goldfarb, 1990; Rywerant, 1983). Feldenkrais himself was aware of some of these emergent disciplines through, for example, his association with thinkers such as Bateson, Katsir (Feldenkrais, Katsir, and Ginsburg 2006), Pribram (Feldenkrais and Pribram 1975/2006), von Foerster (Leri 2006: 13-23), and others (Reese 2015).

The Feldenkrais Method can be experienced in either of two modes, Awareness Through Movement® and Functional Integration®.

### **Awareness Through Movement**

In this mode, usually done in a group or from a recording, the student makes exploratory movements, and directs her or his attention as suggested by the Feldenkrais teacher. The aim is for the student to discover the ways in which she or he moves, and new possible patterns of movement.

Attention is directed to three broad categories of the experience of the self in action, (1) the kinesthetic qualities of movement, (2) the body in relation to the environment (space, gravity and mechanical forces in relation to gravity, and the temporal dimension), (3) attitudes to one's action that may arise, and the possibility of different attitudes, such as moving and attending to oneself without judgment, with an intention of care, or with a playful sense of curiosity. Let us consider these aspects of Awareness Through Movement in more detail.

1. The student is asked to bring forth some particular qualities of action as they move, such as (a) to reduce effort to only the level necessary, (b) to make the movement as smooth as possible, (c) to work well within the limits of their range of movement, (d) unless the movement needs to be ballistic, to make the movement "reversible" (be able to change

direction at any time), (e) to make the movement at an even speed (without sudden acceleration or deceleration), and (f) breathe easily, or have appropriate use of the breath with the movements.

2. Attention is directed to aspects of the parts of the body in relation to the whole body in relation to the environment, such as (a) space (orientation and direction), (b) gravity (changes in the contact with supporting surfaces, e.g. floor, chair) and mechanical force (e.g. through the skeleton when moving in relation to gravity), (c) the temporal aspects of action (timing and rhythm, including pauses and rests), (d) the experience of the air entering and leaving the body.
3. Attention is also directed to feelings about one's body and movement, or noticing one's intentionality (e.g. competitiveness "with oneself" – a feeling that one could or should do more, feelings of incompetence or wanting to 'do it right', excessive striving, or disregard for one's comfort, etc.).
4. In addition, the teacher also makes suggestions that one care for oneself (e.g. taking a non-judgmental attitude, make the movements in a comfortable manner, and not create pain, or increase any pain one may already have), using the quality of breathing and the lack of a sense of muscular strain as measures of this.

The bodily self-awareness that can be stimulated by the processes in Awareness Through Movement is often more subtle, elusive, fleeting, complex, and is often experienced in a more whole and integrated manner, than is suggested by a listing such as this (Gendlin 1978; Shusterman 2008; LeGrand 2011).

### **Functional Integration**

Functional Integration® lessons are the individual mode of the Method, and is often chosen as the mode of using the Method if the person is dealing with major or long-standing challenges, such as chronic pain, recovery from an accident, stroke, neurological conditions, or by performers and others needing a more intense and individualized approach. The student lies on a low table (or sits, or stands), and for much of the lesson, the Feldenkrais teacher gently touches and moves the student with the intention of creating experiences of the body and of movement using the same exploratory principles as Awareness Through Movement. The touch is intended to be communicative rather than purely manipulative in a mechanical sense. The practitioner's touch is intended to be such that the person experiences as much as possible of their own bodily sensation and movement, rather than a sense of the practitioner directing the student in ways she or he *must* move. At the same time, it is suggested that the client has the opportunity to experience the possibilities of movement and feeling offered by the practitioner's sensitive, precise, non-forceful, and "care-full" movements.

The root of the word *compassion* is to feel with or suffer with the other. Braude (2015) and others have suggested that there is a bodily or somatic component in empathy for the other. In this sense, Functional Integration can be seen as a 'compassionate' interaction, in this sense of 'experiencing-with' the other (Leder 1990:161). Functional Integration offers the possibility of a positive experience of 'intercorporeity' (Young 2011:55-87) or 'intercorporality' (Fuchs and DeJaegher 2009:465-486), where for both the student and teacher there is an 'absorption' in the body of the other (Leder 1990:164).

The aims of the Feldenkrais Method are pragmatic: 'The main object is to form an attitude and a new set of responses that permit an even and poised application of oneself to the business of living' (Feldenkrais 1985:107). In contrast to some other mind-body approaches, 'The aim is not complete relaxation, but healthy, powerful, easy and pleasurable exertion' (Feldenkrais, 1964/2010c:37).

### **Feldenkrais Method and phenomenological thought and practice**

It has been suggested that in their form and intention, Feldenkrais lessons have much in common with the phenomenological project (Smyth 2012). As noted, phenomenological thought calls for an openness to the nature of phenomena as they appear in human consciousness. The emphasis is on the lived experience of the person, and how that experience is constitutive of phenomena, and indeed, their world for them (Giorgi 2009; van Manen 2014:408-420). What is sought is greater understanding, rather than explanation or prediction.

In phenomenological practice, a couple of steps are utilized to move toward an as-fresh-as-possible view of the nature of human experience as it is lived-through. The first is the idea of *époche* – a move where the researcher deliberately attempts to bracket, suspend or put into abeyance everyday, *taken-for-granted*, or *scientific* explanations in order to observe as openly as possible what they are observing themselves, what is reported to them by an informant or found in a text. In this way the researcher's fore-knowledge and fore-conceptions can be brought to conscious awareness, and their impact on emergent understandings assessed (Giorgi 2009; LeVassuer 2003; Wertz 2011:124-164). Porter and Robinson (2011) noted that 'the *époche*... is meant to... allow access to the phenomenon in the least prejudiced or corrupted way,' and that '...phenomenology is not a description of the "real world" per se, but our experiences of the perceived world' (55). Feldenkrais suggested that we act on the basis of our perceptions. Understanding a person's bodily experience and world as perceived is an important part of human understanding.

In a similar way to phenomenological practice, the Feldenkrais student could be seen to deliberately set aside time and suspend their usual modes of attention to attend to their lived experience in fresh ways. For example, he or she pays attention to the bodily aspects of life, and to what are often taken-for-granted aspects of experience, such as the qualities of

self-movement (e.g. effort, direction, timing, smoothness) and the experience of living in gravity, or being skeletal (Feldenkrais, 1988/2010). In the process of exploring one's movement, and in response to suggestions from the teacher to, in various ways, *take care of oneself*, one can also come to be aware of one's usual intentionality toward one's body. For example, many people have habits of ignoring or straining the body, or of judging their body and bodily experience.

In a second major step, the phenomenologist attempts to discover what is essential in the phenomena being studied. This is often called the *eidetic* reduction, reflection, or intuition (Porter and Robinson 2011; Wertz 2011:124-164). The *eidōs* refers to the essence, nature, or being of a phenomenon. Phenomenological practice often involves the use of *imaginative variations* to find out what is essential to the nature and structure of an experience or a phenomenon (Wertz 2011:124-164). By imagining what could be removed from the description of a phenomena without it changing the description, by deliberately reversing or shifting usual perceptual angles, and playing with other ways of coming to an understanding, it is hoped that it will be clear what is necessarily for an adequate and plausible description of the phenomenon. Sheets-Johnstone (1998) similarly describes using kinetic or movement 'free variations' on a theme in order to discover more about the experience of self-movement (141).

The Feldenkrais Method also makes use of variations in movement (e.g. in effort, direction, speed, initiation, reversibility, support, smoothness) to stimulate experience and awareness of the self in movement. This may allow for a more precise and in some ways more objective knowledge of the student's body, including clearer senses of orientation, space, location of points in the body, relationships of the parts of the body and how they are articulated to each other and the whole, and of how the body is motile. Awareness Through Movement also makes use of imagined movements in which qualities of movement are also varied in mental simulations (Ginsburg 2010).

In these ways, Feldenkrais practices may clarify what is given and invariant, and what is changeable in the body and how it is experienced (Ginsburg, 2010). (See below for further discussion). In this way the Feldenkrais Method engages with the patterns of perception and action that form our *bodily organization*, our *deportment* (Boss 2001) or *bodily dispositions* (Dreyfus 1991; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

### *The phenomenal body*

Phenomenology is not concerned entirely with either the objective or the subjective, but the intertwining of both in life (Merleau-Ponty, 1973). We both are our body, and have a body. In German, this is the difference between the "lived body," the *Lieb*, and the "physical body," the *Körper*.

The Feldenkrais Method embraces the subjective and objective aspects of the phenomenon of embodiment; the experience of the *phenomenal body* (Morley 2008: 144-163; Young 2002:25-47). Students experience themselves as embodied subjects initiating movement,



generating their own perceptions, directing attention, observing their experience, and carrying out their intention to learn. At the same time, students have the *experience of having a body* that moves in gravity, space and time; a body that has intrinsic heft, volume, and timing (Legrand 2011:204-277). That is, our bodies, *as physical, are experienced or lived through*, and not just an object or thing of scientific description (Plügge 1970:293-311).

With the repetition of the word “body” in a paper such as this it may be easy for the idea of the body as the physical body of Cartesian dualism to be repeatedly evoked, but the reader is invited to stay in touch with the idea of the lived body as the ground of our experience, our sense of self, and our world.

### *The body in its world*

The role of the relationship between the body and its environment, and *its world* in the phenomenological sense is also fundamental in Feldenkrais thinking and practice. Feldenkrais lessons bring attention to the inwardly directed and outwardly directed aspects of embodiment, and the *perceptual reversibility* between them as described by Merleau-Ponty (1962) (Morley 2001:73-82). Take for example the experience of gravity – which is one of the aspects of experience emphasized in Feldenkrais practice. We experience gravity in the soles of our feet. We experience gravity deep in our body, in our bones and joints. We experience gravity at the centre of our head, with the vestibular apparatus of the inner ear. Gravity is not just for physics class. We experience *ourselves* in gravity.

Because one’s world is always experienced through the body, altering one’s perceptions of one’s body should axiomatically alter one’s perceptions of the world. The Feldenkrais Method provides one way of ‘reachieving a direct... contact with the world,’ of experiencing ‘space, time and the world as we “live” them,’ which are part of Merleau-Ponty’s project for phenomenological practice (Merleau-Ponty 1962:vii.).

### *Experience of being a bodily subject and having a physical body*

The Feldenkrais Method embraces, and brings to the foreground, the student’s subjective lived experience of his or her body. However, there are also ways in which the Feldenkrais student’s perception of the body, through actively sensing one’s interaction in the environment, can also be more “objective”. Here “objective” is being used in a more narrow sense than the broadest philosophical usage, to mean a more concrete, precise, and accurate perception of one’s body as an object in gravity, space, and time. As noted above, Feldenkrais lessons – through touch, movement, active proprioceptive sensing or imagery – may help a student better identify (a) the location of important points in the body (e.g. hands, feet, head) in relation to each other and the world, (b) lines for force within the body, (c) the articulations (e.g. shoulders, hips), and (d) the orientation and directions of these parts in movement. In this way the student may discover invariances in the body (e.g. size and space) (Ginsburg 2010; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Greater precision in bodily perception can allow one to carry out one’s practical projects in the world

more effectively.

This new awareness may also challenge subjective habits of perception, which are often distorted in the course of one's history of interactions within the social and cultural world into which the person is thrown (Dreyfus 1991; Morley 2008:144-163; Smyth 2012). For example, there is an extensive literature on how society impacts body image, and the Feldenkrais Method has been used in programs, for example, attending to women's body image concerns (Hutchinson 1985; Laumer, Bauer, Fichter and Milz, 2004).

### *Action, function, and practical bodily engagements*

Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved with a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them' (1962:34). Our *being-in-the-world* is grounded in our everyday coping – our use of tools and equipment, our practical skills and know-how, and our *prevailing affective state* or *mood* in relation to the situations in which we find ourselves thrown (Dreyfus 1991, 2014; Leder 1990; Porter and Robinson 2011).

The Feldenkrais Method engages the 'action-system' to promote improved human functioning (Feldenkrais 1972:38). Husserl posited that all consciousness is consciousness of something – that there is a fundamental intentionality in our thought and action. We are disposed to be oriented in our thought and action to particular things in our world. Much of that intentionality is expressed through a bodily sense of *I can* (Husserl 1989; Sheets-Johnstone 1998). Merleau-Ponty (1962) took up this idea to propose the idea of *motor intentionality* or *operational intentionality* (which will be discussed further below).

In the Feldenkrais Method the concept of *function* is seen as connecting intention to action (Ginsberg 2010). Functions are considered as fundamental patterns of bodily organization that allow for self-maintenance, self-protection, and self-promotion, all of which require self-movement (or living in a society that supports those functions for people who are disabled in their movement capacities) (Feldenkrais 1981; Leder 1990). Using ideas from ecological psychology, these functions would include locomotion and the manipulation of objects and tools, which the environment or culture offer to ensure sustenance, warmth, and shelter. Also included in this description would be functions such as eating, drinking, elimination, grooming, communication, sleeping, and more (Reed 1996). In more everyday language, functions could be seen as involving standing, sitting, lying, walking, running, facing, turning, talking, breathing, directing one's gaze, and again much more. Feldenkrais lessons are often organized around such functional patterns.

In an interesting example of how the body appears through functional activity, phenomenological researcher Sobchack (2010) draws on her experience of an above-the-knee amputation of one of her legs. She describes the variety of experiences of the senses of absence, or presence-through-absence, and presence though pain, of the amputated leg

(51–67). At the same time, she noted that the leg began to appear to her in a way similar to her remaining biological leg, when she first began to walk using her prosthesis. This included the return of clear limb-like sensations of the ball and heel of the foot, which aided her return to bipedal walking (Sobchack 2010:51–67).

### *Health, awareness, and the how of how the body appears*

As many authors have noted, health is often taken for granted until illness or injury brings its absence or loss, or the imbalance that the loss of health implies, to one's conscious attention (Gadamer, 1996). In a similar vein, Leder's (1990) thesis is that the body is often not present in direct experience – it is *absent*, it *disappears*, when one is engaged in pursuing life's projects. In this way of experiencing the body, the body is 'ecstatic' – it disappears into the background of our experience of being (Leder 1990:11). The *appearance* of the body in conscious awareness, then, is often in the form of a "dys-appearance" associated with illness, injury, and disability (Leder 1990:69). In this way, the body-in-awareness is often experienced by people dealing with illness, injury, or pain as the 'body as a threat' (Leder 1990:161).

The body also appears to direct experience in the context of life experiences associated with the lifespan (such as growth, adolescence, pregnancy, and aging) and development (such as sexuality and care giving) (Leder 1990). Another context in which conscious bodily awareness comes to the fore is in skill development. There is a growing qualitative research literature on the experience of the body in sports, especially individual sports, such as distance running and scuba diving (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010; Howe and Morris 2009:308-330; Merchant 2011:215–234).

Feldenkrais (1929/2013) in his early writing used the term *unconscious* to discuss the kinds of capacities for decision, action, and creativity below the level of the conscious mind. Writing about the importance of the experiential and implicit knowledge available through the action of the unconscious he noted,

the role of the unconscious is not limited to memorizing, storing and then making its knowledge available upon demand; its creative ability is vast. It uses its treasured experience to reform, to reconfigure and create new varieties that are beyond the ability of most people using their mental faculties on a conscious level (Feldenkrais 1929/2013:4)

The term unconscious is now used less to describe these aspects of human functioning, partly because of the association of the term with the Freudian concept of the unconscious as the repository of repressed psychological material. Instead, the terms *non-conscious* and *pre-conscious* are more likely to be used.

Contemporary neuroscience supports the view put forward by Merleau-Ponty (1962) that much of our perception and action in the world does not achieve the level of conscious awareness, but

instead occurs at a non-conscious or pre-conscious level (Freeman 2000; Khilstrom 1987, 2012; Rywerant 2008). Some aspects of our biological functioning are not available to perception. For example, some of our internal organs and systems, or subtle aspects of the environment that can prime how we respond, may not even be capable of being brought to conscious awareness: they are non-conscious. However, many aspects of our functioning that are not normally part of our usual conscious awareness, focused as it is on our projects and goals, can be brought to conscious awareness with practices like Feldenkrais Method. For example, our orientation in space, proprioception of the positions and relationships of parts of our bodies, the nature and quality of our breathing, and many other things that are usually in the background can be brought to awareness. They can go from being pre-conscious to being part of conscious awareness. Even such things as a sense of raised blood pressure, usually not considered perceptible, can be felt by some people (Bakal 1999).

Ginsburg (2010) has noted that ‘all human action requires an integration of conscious and non-conscious activity, and also requires immense and complex organization’ (81). The Feldenkrais Method aims to make use of conscious awareness, including bringing some pre-conscious experience into conscious awareness, as well as alterations in non-conscious aspects of perception and movement, to improve all aspects of human functioning – spontaneous action, creativity and expression, as well as conscious cognition and reflective self-awareness (Claxton 2007:14-43; Ginsburg 2010; Shusterman 2008).

It is assumed that some of the changes in the Feldenkrais student’s action and functioning occur at a non-conscious or pre-conscious level, however conscious attention is part of the process of attending to, and altering, aspects of one’s movements and bodily perceptions (Freeman 2000; Ginsburg 2010; Smyth 2012). Taking up what is usually non-conscious or pre-conscious, and considered as part of the involuntary aspects of perception and action, can allow one to bring these experiences into the ‘sphere of ownness’ (Husserl 1950/1999:92; and quoted in Morley 2001:76). Husserl (1950/1999) proposed that because we can ‘“act” somatically’ and are ‘perceptively active’ we can gain access to a unique and individual sense of oneself as an ‘animate organism’ and a ‘psychophysical unity’. This constitutes a sense of ‘ownness,’ even as our experience also gives us access to a sense of the other and ‘the external world’ (97–99).

Students of the Feldenkrais Method can face the contradictory nature of bodily awareness – that attention often discloses levels of discomfort, lack of ease, and even pain, that have not been noticed before. At the same time, it offers the possibility of altering the patterns of bodily organization associated with *dis-ease* and pain. Thus the Feldenkrais Method can be involved in two ways with the conscious awareness of the body – bringing experience to attention as it is, but also teaching the skills associated with the ability to sense the body. That is, learning to become a witness to one’s own experience (Morley, 2001; 2008:144-163). As such, the Feldenkrais Method is like the Eastern practices of Zen, Tantra and Yoga identified by Leder, which actualize ‘positive states of relaxation, concentration, [and] ecstasy’, and where ‘the body

is viewed as a crucial medium of self-development' (1990:153). As Leder (1990) points out, most of these positive practices that promote positive bodily awareness are pursued on a voluntary basis, and often outside of the context of illness (Morley 2008), but are of value as a counter to the appearance of the body in illness. Leder notes that,

Whether attention is systematically developed or not, we have no choice but to remember the body when it screams out in pain, disrupts our projects with fatigue or lust, is wracked by disease, or threatened by death. If positive practices are shunned, such dysfunctional episodes can become the primary mode of body awareness, serving to define corporeality as a whole. (1990:153)

One valuable construct in this context is Gendlin's *felt-sense* as a form of awareness of the self and one's current state that is an opening to meaning arising in, from, and through bodily experience (Gendlin, 1962, 1978). Through the practice of *focusing* (Gendlin 1978) and other forms of somatic awareness, one may bring forth awareness of the body as both a focus of attention and a source of meaning.

Bringing together the *felt sense* with *appearance* (in the sense used by Leder), one could argue that practices like the Feldenkrais Method bring forth the idea and experience of a *positive felt-appearance* of the body. That is, a cultivated capacity to bring forth bodily awareness when it is needed or desired to allow us to live in a healthy or more full way.

At the same time, as we are always embedded in our world, or situated, then any bodily felt sense, including ones of healthfulness, includes our sense of ourselves in our situation. The felt sense involves feeling, not just the "stuff inside," but the sentience of what is happening in one's living, in the outside' (Gendlin quoted in Todres 2007:23).

## Health

### The healthy uses of somatic awareness

Shusterman (1997) points out that for many philosophers from Saint Paul to Kant, somatic introspection led to melancholia or worse, and more recently even William James presented the common view that attention to somatic sensation always gets in the way of spontaneous or authentic being-in-the-world. In his proposal for a "somaesthetics," Shusterman (1997) challenges these views. He invites us to ask whether, on the basis of these reservations, should we give up the practical utility of altering our habits of action and perception, as well as the value of somatic awareness in the service of the philosophical injunction to "know thy self"? Instead he proposes that we explore how and when somatic awareness serves us, and the best ways to cultivate it.

In medicine too, somatic awareness has been seen as an unhealthy fixation on the body and its

sensations; a sign of hypochondria (Mehling *et al* 2009). Bakal (1999) proposes instead that somatic awareness is valuable in coming to sense the health of one's body. He suggests that it is possible and desirable for someone to identify the very early stages of conditions like headache, and even elevated blood pressure, and take action before there is a worsening of symptoms.

The Feldenkrais Method can help people develop the awareness of positive practices for health, such as learning to rest when in pain (O'Connor and Webb 2002). In a qualitative study of participants in a Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement program for people with chronic pain, Öhman, Aström and Malmgren-Olsson (2011) found that participants reported an increased ability to regulate themselves, a greater sense of trust in their body, were less willing to "sacrifice" their bodily comfort to social expectations of what they should do, and felt that they had more choice of how to respond to pain and to life's demands. The Feldenkrais Method can help give people a felt-sense (Gendlin 1978) of how it is to breathe easily, and of balance, ease, comfort, and self-compassion (Smyth 2012). This could include a sense of how to "slow down," to "ease up", [or] to "let go" (Leder 2008:126). Becoming more attuned to the phenomenal body creates the possibility of becoming more attuned to the body as organism and the ground of the experience of self.

In reviewing the *various bodies* that have been constructed by medical thought, Levin (2005) suggests that we have now reached a time where medicine may be able to correlate medical findings in the physical body with the body of 'experienced meaning,' or the 'body of lived experience' (99-102). He writes,

However, it must be noted that medicine's success in making such correlations does not depend only on advances in medical knowledge. It also depends on patients' ability to fine-tune their embodied awareness, their sensitivity to processes of bodily experiencing, and the skillfulness in carrying those processes forward into more articulate, more discriminating meanings. For many centuries, Western culture has denied recognition of this ability and consequently made it very difficult for people to enjoy contacting and working with their bodies' felt meanings [...], the intricate meanings carried by the bodies in co-responsiveness to particular situations and circumstances (101).

### ***Befindlichkeit*: How do you find yourself?**

In German, one way of asking "How are you?" is "Wie befinden Sie sich?": literally, "How do you find yourself?" (Gendlin 1978–1979, "Introduction", para. 3). Drawing on this everyday language, Heidegger created the noun *Befindlichkeit*, which is often translated as *mood* or *to be in a mood*, to describe the phenomena of one key aspect of our existence. Gendlin suggested that the term has the meaning of 'how-are-youness' or 'self-finding'. It is reflexive, in that it is a process of self-examination, as well as connotative of one's feelings of situatedness (1978–1979, "Introduction", para. 4). One's sense of one's state of health can have some of these qualities of mood as: a felt or an existential sense, in the context of one's situation, that

also involves an active process of feeling oneself.

A practice like the Feldenkrais Method can alter the qualities of how people find themselves. It could be argued that much of one's primary affective state is reflective of the content of our sense of well-being, or of 'dis-ease' (Leder 1998:126). A shift in the *habit body* can create significantly different bodily dispositions. Greater bodily ease can help shift one's overall mood. It can alter one's *feelings of being* (Ratcliffe 2008).

At the same time, the skills of 'feeling feelings' (Rothfield 2008, "Title") or the ability to 'feel for the feeling' ("Prolegomena," para. 3), are learnable through somatic practices. Again, some of the sense of our selves is more bodily, and some more situational, but always intertwined. We need to be able to feel for both, and how they interact.

### **Health as skillful coping**

Health sociologist, Antonovsky (1978, 1987), suggested health can be thought of as a continuum from 'dis-ease' to 'health-ease' (1979:55). Like Feldenkrais, Antonovsky saw health not as an absence of illness or injury, but as one's capacity to cope; one's resilience (Antonovsky 1979; Feldenkrais 1979/2010b). In one way, salutogenesis can be seen as a form of *skillful coping* (Dreyfus 1991, 2014) in response to challenges to one's health.

Drawing on Antonovsky's thinking, Wayne Jonas (Duensing 2008:48-54) suggested that a salutogenic orientation involves the capacity to find and choose the treatments and practices that move one toward health. In a study of breast cancer patients who felt they had successful experiences with the use of complementary and alternative medicine, many of the women used their bodily experience as a 'gauge' for the evaluation of conventional and complementary therapies, and as a 'guide' for their choice of alternative therapies (Salamonsen, Kruse and Ericksen, 2012:1505). Again, somatic practices can contribute to the development of resources and competencies for dealing with health challenges, especially developing the capacities of bodily awareness that can inform the trajectory of one's health choices. At the same time, the experience of successfully altering one's bodily experience can generate *hope* (Feldenkrais 2006; Lowe, *et al* 2002; Öhman *et al* 2011:153-161).

### **Bodily dispositions, affordances, and an intentional arc toward health**

One way of thinking about health is as a form of *know how* in dealing with challenges and toward one's potential to live a desired life consistent with one's goals (Feldenkrais 1979/2010b). It can be seen as a capacity for knowing how to make one's life more integrated or whole again. Indeed, *whole* is the root of the word *health* (Gadamer 1989).

This process may involve both conscious goals, but also the non-conscious as a kind of motor or operational intentionality (Dreyfus 1996; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Our world is a field of potentialities that the body grasps and perceives (Hass 2008). 'On a pre-conscious level, the

body prepares itself for action consistent with what is of value to the organism and while making use of the *affordances* in the environment' (Smyth 2012:96). Hass (2008) writes that Merleau-Ponty's idea requires recognition of 'the living body's positions and dispositions, its global orientation, its attunement to a situation, and the body's subsequent preparation for the reception of stimulations and the body's subsequent responses'. He notes that, 'In this sense the living body greets the world that has influence on it' (81).

Building on the concept of motor or operational intentionality, Merleau-Ponty (1962) extends the idea to propose that one's life has the aspect of an *intentional arc*. He writes,

Cognitive life... is subtended by an "intentional arc," which projects round us our past, our future, our human setting, or physical, ideological, and moral situation, or rather results us in being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, or intelligence, of sensibility and motility. (Merleau-Ponty 1962:157)

The intentional arc can be understood as a field of meaningfulness. Through our bodily department, as well as our conscious actions, we act on this field of meaningfulness, and it acts on us. The intentional arc means that we develop a set of deep ongoing skills and habits – our usual ways of perceiving, acting, and being. It is the way that we meet the world in a bodily way, and our action over time that gives our lives, and therefore our world, its shape and direction (Dreyfus 1996). Therefore, to change our habitual ways of being requires a change in our habitual bodily dispositions (Dreyfus 1986, 1991). To change bodily dispositions requires changes in motor or operational intentionality, as well as in cognition. We can be less reactive and live more consistently with our conscious intentions if we have more choice in how we respond to the world (Feldenkrais 1972). Somatic practices like the Feldenkrais Method offer that possibility.

Merleau-Ponty notes that this 'intentional arc "goes limp" in illness' (157). However, the world offers a wide range of physical, social, cultural potentialities or affordances for health. Our intentional arc can be formed through and around our bodily self and directed toward our health as an object of our intentionality. A practice like the Feldenkrais Method affords the possibility for a shift in our deep ways of being bodily in the world: the way we breathe, move, perceive ourselves, and possibilities for action. By bringing forth the value of bodily experience, providing the experience of self-care, and developing the abilities to shift perception and action, the Feldenkrais Method can help bend one's intentional arc toward health.

### **The Feldenkrais Method and health**

The Feldenkrais Method can contribute to (a) conscious awareness of the body which can be drawn upon when it is needed to deal with challenges and breakdowns such as illness and injury, (b) the development of non-judgmental self awareness necessary for acceptance and self-care when dealing with health conditions, (c) the prevention of injury and chronic conditions



through the development of more skillful and appropriate action in the world, and to bring forth the ability to make use of healthful or salutogenic affordances in our world, and (d) allow one to shift into an *ecstatic, integrated* state of being immersed in one's practical engagement with one's world (Leder 1990; Feldenkrais 1981).

By engagement with the conscious and non-conscious aspects of the meaning of bodily experience, the Feldenkrais Method can provide the ground for a healthy orientation toward being, and being healthier. It can develop capacities of the self where the body can *appear in a felt way* as needed or desired, but mostly there is a change in bodily dispositions toward a new health-oriented, bodily intentionality.

### **Conclusion: the Feldenkrais Method, the body and the phenomenology of health**

These possibilities deserve investigation, particularly research from a phenomenological perspective. In this paper I have suggested that there are some significant similarities between phenomenological practice, such as the *époche* and the exploration of what is an essential, or *eidetic*, nature of certain experiences, and the practices of the Feldenkrais Method. The emphasis in phenomenology on the *lived, experienced body* as a basis for knowledge and being-in-the-world provides a strong basis for using it to help investigate a practice of somatic learning such as the Feldenkrais Method. In addition, phenomenological thinkers have created interesting and valuable reflections on aspects of the bodily experience, including (a) the emphasis on how we are always already engaged bodily in our environment, situation, or world, (b) the nature of our practical engagements and skillful coping in the world, and (c) the importance of the experience of self-movement. In relation to health these reflections include (a) how our bodies appear to us in consciousness are profoundly influenced by the experience of illness and health, (b) the importance our mood in response to our situation, (c) the value of somatic awareness in health care practice, and (d) how we can shift the intentional arc, developing capacities for new perceptual and action responses – a new bodily, life orientation toward health. I am proposing that this literature provides useful touchstones, images, and frameworks as potentially very useful '*insight cultivators*' (van Manen 2014:408-420) as we further research the relationship between the Feldenkrais Method and health.

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## **Biography**

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