

Session one: Embodied practices, movement and mobility

Chair: Sue Fleming (STAT, Society of the Teachers of the Alexander Technique)

'Alexander Technique, movement and mobility' - Malcolm Williamson, MATTS

Malcolm Williamson, from The Manchester Alexander Technique Training School, talked about the role of the Alexander Technique in 'being present, alert and observant'. Malcolm defines the Alexander Technique as a way of dealing with the unknown, in other words, the future. While every practice is embodied, according to Malcolm, Alexander Technique is an 'embodying practice'. Grounded in the present, it opposes the common human tendency towards regretting the past and fearing the future. Instead, people can learn to remain quietly self-aware during everyday activities. While our attention is on the task in hand, we usually ignore 'incidental activities', described by him as the activities we take for granted, such as sitting or standing. As a consequence we sometimes get out of balance and may develop habits of muscular contraction' which can result in a subsequent (and usually subconscious) fear of falling. The technique can be applied in daily life to stop undesired behaviours (habits), and foster a more grounded and present approach. By becoming aware of those mal-adaptive habits, people can re-educate the way they move and regain some of their inherent poise and stature. The aim is to develop a 'reliable sensory appreciation' through 'quiet self-observation' of bodily movement and kinaesthetic learning. He referred to some advocates of the technique who addressed the need to reach a balance between subject and object, self and environment, amongst them the philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey.

'The Sociology of the Body and Embodied Sociology'- Nick Crossley, Sociology, Manchester University

Nick Crossley explores both the sociology of the body and embodied sociology. He poses the question of how we might do sociology differently if we set off from the premise that we are embodied human agents. Given that everything humans do is embodied, to study what we do is embodied sociology. People have different forms of awareness about their bodies; one person may be aware of his or her medical condition, another person of the aesthetic dimension of his or her body. I may be reflectively aware of my body, but there are many activities I engage in and things that I do with my body that I am unaware of. In addition, I sense others' experience of my body. Other people are aware of me as a body, and I may feel caught up in the gaze by the other. Class differences, for instance, may be interpreted through the observation of embodied action. How do social, economic, or cultural factors restrict one's freedom of movement? Crossley referred to Merleau-Ponty, as an example of a philosopher who criticises the idea of the disembodied mind, a deeply ingrained western conception with roots in the Cartesian opposition between body and mind. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach

towards the body is not unlike other reflexive and mindful body techniques, such as the Alexander Technique. If for Descartes the body is a clockwork machine that houses the mind with its rich intellectual capacity, Merleau-Ponty sees the relationship between the two as a mindful exchange premised on an embodied intelligence, even when the individual is not aware of it. Crossley also referred to early anthropological works on embodied experience, such as the classic *Body Techniques* by Marcel Mauss who discusses how swimming techniques change over time and across cultures, as well as Iris Young's paper 'Throwing like a girl' from the late 1970s which looks at the gendered aspects of embodied behaviours.

'Ageing, mobility and moving through life': Findings from the Step Change project
- Niamh Moore, Sociology, Edinburgh and Camilla Lewis, Sociology, Manchester

Niamh Moore and Camilla Lewis set off from their initial findings of the Step-Change Project with the general public in the broader project, to explore how people who are teachers or students of the Alexander Technique have different experiences of movement and mobility. While several themes came up in interviews with the general public, ageing was one of the most common concerns, with people anxious about their mobility in the future and feeling generally pessimistic about it. Ageing was perceived primarily as a physical decline characterised by loss of bodily features such as hair and teeth, and a gradual decrease in mobility. By contrast, interviewees who practised the Alexander Technique were enthusiastic about how they can use this to adapt to age-related difficulties. They were using the technique daily to counteract loss of balance for example. Differently from the main study, people talked about getting their confidence and mobility back and gaining a new sense of self. The focus seemed to shift from the theme of pain and discomfort when moving, and the idea of frailty, to expressions of joy and pleasure. With the Alexander Technique, movement acquires a different connotation: it is the journey between standing and sitting that counts, rather than moving between places. In contrast, there is little in the literature on the notion of body movement that does not involve moving between places. While David Bissell (2008) talks about moving in and out of positions of comfort and discomfort while sitting, the Alexander Technique allows us to have an experience of balancing easily on the sitting bones, moving effortlessly from sitting to standing, lying down in 'active rest', and remaining present and engaged.

Group Discussion

- Framework of empowerment
- Discussion about the NHS and related policies
- Differences in approach to address cultural differences (as in the case of immigrants)
- Choreography of everyday life/ micro-choreography
- The need to target domains of practice, as in the case of patients recovering from a stroke who have to 'learn' a new choreography

- Choreography with room for improvisation can lead to the unexpected
- Impact of the Alexander Technique on researchers