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## Bodily Knowing: A Path to Strengthen Community Wellness

### ***My Relation to Bodily Knowing:***

My first experience with intentional movement was with running. I started running when I was in the womb: my mom ran with me when she was pregnant. I started running on my own when I was five years old in the kid's race that my mom signed me up for...without asking. I started dancing when I was a kid, around eight years old. I followed my best friend, Sabine, into a dance academy. We signed up for hip hop. A few years later I was taking jazz, tap, lyrical and hip hop. I started biking...well I don't remember when. For as long as I could remember my family would choose bikes to transport us to places instead of the car. I started practicing yoga when I was a child, my mom wouldn't ask for a babysitter, but take me into the quiet, dark rooms with her. Thinking back on my life, I am hardly ever sitting.

For the longest time I pursued these heavily movement-based activities with the mindset of intentionally moving my body to strengthen my health as an individual, and even sometimes, sadly, to burn calories. It wasn't until I signed up for a West African dance class in college, that I was introduced to the idea of moving my body as a way of experiencing a new way of knowing, one that situated my body at the center. This class opened awakened me to 'bodily knowing' as an orientation to 'being in the world.' This orientation to human knowledge enabled me to learn more about my identity and strengthen my ability to connect and create community with those around me.

### ***Community Wellness:***

To understand community wellness and how its maintenance is tied up in bodily ways of knowing, it is first important to understand the meaning of wellness. While there is no universal definition, wellness can generally be understood as a lifestyle that fosters a state of balance between the emotional, social, spiritual and physical health of the individual and their environment (Clendon, et. al 7).

Like the term *wellness*, no one definition exists that can encompass all the understandings and applications around the world of community wellness. One social scientist defines community "the dynamic relationship between people and their environment that arises when people use that environment to maintain balance and purposeful direction" (Clendon, et. al 8). One can also understand community wellness as a multitude of individuals acting on their individual wellness goals that are manifesting in the same environment. Therefore, the well-being of the community is dependent on the balance of these dynamic individual goals.

To understand community wellness operates in world it is necessary to understand beliefs that have been obstacles to human's ability to orient toward bodily knowing. One specifically prominent belief in human wellness is mind-body dualism.

### ***Mind-Body Dualism:***

Mind-body dualism emerged during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century during the Enlightenment period when Western (Euro-American) philosophers, theologians and natural scientist alike were questioning human existence (Forstmann, et. al 1239). Among the topics of these existential debates was human epistemologies or human systems of knowing. In other words, ‘How do we know what we know?’ (Linn Geurts 230). This existential curiosity led to the examination of the human self, specifically the relationship between the mind and body, and their relation to the human process of knowledge acquisition.

French philosopher, Rene Descartes introduced his theory now called ‘mind-body dualism.’ Descartes’ theory argues that the mind is an immaterial substance, while the body is a material substance. Because of this perceived qualitative difference between the two substances, Descartes contends that they are two distinct entities (Forstmann 1239). Westphal). Further Descartes claims that thinking and reasoning occur in the pure substance of the mind, which holds the Self, while the body is “simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort” (Cottingham 239). This assertion is heavily influenced by Descartes’ Christian values and the belief of the afterlife. Cartesian dualism posits that not only is the mind an immaterial substance, but an immortal one, thus allowing the human self to continue to the afterlife. In his fourth reply to his book *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes writes: “man is simply a soul that makes use of the body” (Almog XVII).

### ***Effects of Mind-Body Dualism:***

The epistemological effects of mind-body dualism have had long lasting effects. Clinical Psychologist, Neeta Mehta, ideas emerging from mind-body dualism have been embedded in cultural ideologies all over the world (Mehta 4). In her book, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*, Linn Geurts purports that this has led to a lack of discussion around bodily ways of knowing (Linn Geurts 228).

Further, Descartes’ theory of the body as “corruptible” and the mind as a “pure substance” has led to a valorization of the mind over the body. This belief laid the groundwork for the distinction between the ‘object’ and the ‘subject,” framing the body as “biological raw material” and the mind as a “central processing system” (Csordas 8). These ideas of the body and mind have subsequently created the characterization and distinction of the body as a product of nature and the mind associated with culture production, positioning the body as an object outside the self’s being in the world (Csordas 9). In this characterization no room is left for the body as an agent in a relationship with culture creation and transmission.

Critics of Cartesian Dualism also discuss health effects of the dualistic theory. These effects are seen via the bio-medical model of health, which is built on the idea of wellness as the absence of disease (Mehta 3). French philosopher Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty says that state of the body is conscious via a “dys-appearance.” In other words, we notice the body only when we experience diseases, illness or dysfunction. (Csordas 8).

### ***New Approaches to Ways of Knowing:***

In the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new theories started emerging, reshaping the relationship between the mind and body. With the introduction of a new wave of social scientists and philosophers an understanding of the body via a semiosis paradigm developed. This paradigm asserts that the body is a part of knowledge creation via interpretive symbols. The semiotic paradigm asserts that the body makes invisible ongoings of the mind visible to the outside world. (Csordas 11). This paradigm is also referred to as representational view of the

body. For example, supporters of this paradigm would assert that kneeling while praying solely function to physically represent devotional ongoings of the mind.

More recently theories have emerged that go beyond the body as a representation of inner cognition and see the body as a site of culture ‘receiving’ and ‘transmission.’ One such theorist is Merleau-Ponty who takes a phenomenological perspective of how we know what we know. This perspective favors the nature of immediate conscious experience in informing human perception (APA 2023). In the example of kneeling to pray, phenomenologists would argue that the importance of kneeling when praying also lies in the sensational experience of praying itself, Merleau-Ponty rejects the empiricist model that asserts that external objects stimulate our internal organs such that we register sensory data. Instead, he adopts a bodily way of knowing that embraces the notion that perception begins in the body and ends in objects. In other words, our perception of the world begins with bodily sensations. Merleau-Ponty entitles this theory ‘pre-objectivity’ (Geurts 74).

Linn Geurts furthers Csordas and Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment and phenomenological theories in efforts to further close the gap between “cognitive models of perception and the phenomenal level of sensation, experience and bodily existence” (Linn Geurts 6). Geurts rejects the ideas of an objective and “pre-cultural” body. Instead, she contends that a culture’s logic and epistemology is dependent on bodily sensations. Geurts calls this process ‘*sensing*,’ which she defines as “bodily ways of gathering information (6).” Geurts believes that a large reason societies do not orient toward ‘sensing’ is because of the legacy of Cartesian dualism, which privileges mental representation and external ways of knowing, rather than bodily sensations (7).

Further, Geurts deems the taken for granted five-sense taxonomy, a folktale resulting from the legacy of mind-body dualism. Geurts also points out the lack of kinesthetic senses in the model (a person’s awareness of the position and movement of the parts of the body by means of the sensory organ), which she also deems a result of Cartesian dualism. (Cambridge 2023). Instead of the five-sense model, Geurts believes that senses are culturally embedded. She claims that each culture has a sensory order, which she calls a *sensorium*. Sensoriums guide cultural values and what it means to be a human of that culture in any given time and place. (10) While we largely perceive senses as being ‘natural,’ ‘pre-cultural,’ agents; Geurts says we only hold this association because we learn them as children. “In other words, a cultural group’s sensory order reflects aspects of the world that are so precious to it that (although they remain largely unconscious and habitual) they are things that children growing up in this culture developmentally come to carry in their very bodies” (231). Another way of understanding the theory of culturally embedded senses is through the term of *embodiment*. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines this term as ‘history turned into nature’ (Linn Geurts 231). This phrase furthers the ideology that the human body is a cultural agent, which informs and is informing ideas of self and relationship. While one may think ongoings of the body, like senses, are biologically predetermined, Geurts and Bourdieu inform us that they only become ‘biological’ through years of socialization.

In her book, Linn Geurts explains the connection between cultural values and senses through an interaction she had within a small African Village in Angola. In this example, a mother asks her two sons to go and get her some water from the well. But the two sons don’t go straight to the well, rather they move this way and that way, laughing and taking their time to get to the well. The mother yells out “*lulgulugu*” repeatedly. *Lulgulugu* is an Anlo-land sense which translates to ‘wandering’ as well as ‘lazy.’ It is important here to note that this community’s senses are largely kinesthetic, so it isn’t out of the norm that feeling a certain way while walking

is a sense. More than being bothered that her sons weren't fetching her water efficiently, the mother was worried about their character which was being doubted by their *lugulugu-ness*. Geurts sums up the logic from the mother: "if you move in a *lugulugu* fashion you experience sensations of *lugulugu-ness* and begin thinking in a *lugulugu* way and become a *lugulugu* person, which is then evident to others in the way your *lugulugu* character is embodied in your *lugulugu walk*," (76). This example displays how one's senses inform one's experience of being in the world which in turn shapes the mode in which one thinks, naturally shaping the way one interacts with others.

### *Bodily Ways of Know in Live Action:*

While there are many examples of intentional bodily practices that heighten awareness of one's orientation to/being in the world, this paper will examine West African dance as it aligns up with my personal experience of sensing. West African dance will be used to discuss the multitude of dances that originated in West Africa that have been studied and found to share a lot of similarities that will be discussed later in this paper. Although I have and will be using the term, blindly using the term 'West African dance' is problematic. Referring to the multitude of dances in the region of West Africa as 'West African dance' is like referring to the variety of dances in South America as 'South American Dance' (Kwashie Kuwor 48). But people don't, they say Cumbia or Salsa or Bachata. There are as many dances in West Africa as there are ethnic groups. Many dance anthropologists, like Doris Green, argue that it is a massive generalization that has the possibility of hiding the diversity and complexity of West Africa. This paper will utilize the terms 'West-African Dance' because of the lack of research and literature existing on specific ethnic dances in West Africa and Africa in general.

In its traditional form, African dance is a lifestyle. It is a method of communication and expression, an orienting space for community gathering and a historical repository (Green 13). African dance, which is known for its holism is centered around four major components: movement, music, multisensory modalities and visual forms (Welsh Asante 147).

The first component, movement, arises from the human body. The movements found in African dance emerge from everyday activities and experiences in African societies. It is not a detachment from the everyday life of the people, but emanation from the people themselves (Welsh Asante 147).

Music, the second component of West African dance, is inseparable from the movement. Dance anthropologist, Doris Green, writes, "if African music would not exist, then African dance would not exist," (Green 13). African music takes root in spoken African languages and becomes the basis for movement creation. Many ethnic groups all over Africa create special languages, designing and tuning their instruments in certain ways to play this language. The instruments in the dance, most of the time which are drums, create rhythms which guide the dancers. An example of this connection is present in the *Agbadza*, a celebration dance in Anlo-Ewe land of West Africa. The Ewe word *wu* refers to both 'dance' and 'drum'- the dominant instrument used in *Agbadza* (Kwashie Kuwor 50).

The third component, multisensory modalities, captures the seven kinesthetic senses that operate in the dancer's body: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensionality, epic memory, holism and repetition. All these senses work to foster relation with the environment around the dancer via identity expression, communication, intersubjectivity, and communal learning (Welsh Asante 146).

The curvilinear aspect of West African dance relies on bodily knowing and in hand cultivates a stronger community well-being among dancers.

The curvilinear sense can be seen in a multitude of aspects: form, shape and structure; and types of West African dances (Welsh Asante 147). Structurally many West African dances move in a circular fashion. This format of the dance continues in neo-traditional West African dance settings like classes or performances.

In her ethnography exploring West African Dance in New York City and Dakar, ethnographer, Eleni Bizas discusses the curvilinear sense of West African Dance and its role in community creation. One specific field note entails description of the curvilinear aesthetic functioning in the dance classes. She writes “At the end of class we form a circle and one by one enter to dance (Bizas 39). Apply a *sensing* analysis to the scene in the dance class, one can see dancers as conversing and negotiating identity through dance moves. In a Cartesian dualistic-dominated world it is easy to assume that communication occurs through language, but in this dance class, dancers are communicating via kinesthetic senses. When one steps in to dance in the middle of the circle, their experience of their movement creates a sensational feeling for the individual which in turn shapes the way in which the individual continues to move. As said, senses are shaped by culture and thus shape one’s individual identity. Thus, In the dance space these movements are a representation of one’s being, and thus communicate to others parts of their identity.

In her discussion of *sensing* theory, Geurts also discusses how the orientation works to facilitate connection. She says that state of well-being is dependent on a perceived shared sensibilia (possible stimuli) and mental representations. “A state of well-being is dependent on a person’s sensations and perceptions of ‘things’ being congruent with the perceptions of those around him, or that a person’s interpretations of various sensibilia be constant with mental representations that others hold about those same sources of sensibilia (Geurts 239). In other words, we tend to have a stronger bond with those who we think share a similar worldview. While this might seem like a far-out goal, as we are often surrounded by people with different cultural values- different sensibilia, this is where bodily-knowing practices strengthen connection amongst diversity. Sensing can operate as a means to negotiate identities and create communal values and ultimately form community and continue to strengthen it. Healthy communities usually don’t consist of people with totally congruent sensoriums, but this doesn’t mean there must be a lack of connection. Via communication of one’s values and orientation to the world, understanding can occur. Looking back, this is how Clendon, et. al defines community wellness: a multitude of individuals pursuing individual projects in harmony.

I experienced this orientation to ways of knowing before in my West African dance class at St. Olaf. I experienced both the sensation where I felt I had very similar sensibilia to a community member as well as a time where I felt I had very different sensibilia to a community member. It was toward the end of the class session in the semester, and we were practicing specific challenging moves from a dance. The Professor, Dr. Cudjoe, stepped into the center and looked at me. We were dancing in the circle together. I could very much tell now looking back at it that we had very similar sensibilia and mental representations. I could see through his body that the movements we were doing were making him feel very similar to ways I was feeling. WE shared *seselelame*, the Anlo-Ewe word for feelings in the body (Linn Geurts 83). He and I were both smiling big at times or sometimes closing our eyes. We were both moving ferociously. Because of our shared sensibilia, Cudjoe and I experienced a connection. Dr. Cudjoe is the reason I am writing this paper.

This essay presents a lot of epistemological-shifting information. It is hard to wrap one's mind around the fact that the five-sense model is just that, a model. Who knew that cultural distinctions affected how we move our body, and this affects how we connect with those around us? So, what to do with this information? If one's goal is to strengthen social well-being, one need not jump right into a West African dance class. Start with paying attention to your body. How do you feel and move when you be in the world? Then start to look at other's bodies, watching them move, and ask yourself, how might they feel? What might be their cultural values based on their movements. If you like to intentionally move your body join a dance class or a yoga class or go on a walk with friend. Again, pay attention to your own body and other's. These intentional bodily practices just might heighten your awareness to ways of bodily knowing. Who knows, this might just be your gift to a community.

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