

Formative Psychology: An Antidote to Descartes' Dualism

Christina Loeffel Hickey, MA, MFT

Abstract

Drawing from personal experiences, the author describes how by using the Formative Psychology methodology in a variety of family and stepfamily circumstances, she learned to work with her responses and experiences in the physical somatic present, rather than thinking about them as narratives based on stories of the past. She describes the transition from a reliance on a psychological language rooted in dualities and oppositional dramas of mind/body, understanding/reacting, conscious/unconscious to a Formative somatic language, narrative and perspective.

Keywords

Dualism – Embodiment – Formative Language – Organismic Experience – Formative Perspective – Comparative Narratives – Mind/Body Dualism

When I first began working and studying with Stanley Keleman, the language of psychology with its focus on thoughts and feelings and words like needs, wants, power and self-esteem was deeply embedded in how I understood myself and others. Notions like integrating parts of oneself, personalizing an archetype and forming a relationship with the unconscious were everyday language for me before I studied Formative Psychology. From my academic studies I understood that this psychological language was rooted in the Cartesian separation of mind and body and thus noted, with fascination, Stanley Keleman's ability to communicate his experiences, both personally and therapeutically, without using this Cartesian dichotomy.

In my graduate studies, which focused on the theories and practices of Carl Jung and his students, the resolution of dualism was a primary focus and a client's presenting problems were seen in this light. What was unconscious was a function of the opposing forces of a person's life (e.g., masculinity/femininity; good/evil, love/hate, body/mind). Integration of the two sides of an archetype was a path to individuation, a goal of long-term therapy. Although departing from the singular Oedipal mythology of Freud's approach, this goal was the same: Bringing the unconscious into consciousness.

Then, one day Stanley said to me, "The body *is* the unconscious." In that moment, what had been theoretical became practical and what had been invisible and mysterious was accessible. What I was learning from Stanley Keleman was that the unknown is how we body ourselves and the five step methodology he has laid out are a way to educate ourselves about this embodying process.

Just as I was beginning my relationship with Formative Psychology, I entered into a relationship with a man who would become my husband. Working with Stanley during these early years of our relationship and doing the exercises, I began the process of growing a Formative perspective and formulating my personal goals differently than I had before. First, I learned to identify how I was bodying myself physically (i.e., squeezing, stiffening, using muscular pressure to make shapes, gestures etc.) Slowly, I began to experience the relationship between how I was bodied in situations and how I experienced these situations. As I practiced the bodying steps, I learned that I could influence how I was bodied. Initially, I was amazed that I could alter my experiences in so many significant ways with small changes just in the intensity of my musculature. Being mostly porous, it took some time before I could sustain a form long enough to identify it and recognize its particular effects (i.e., feelings, thoughts, sensations). Fortunately,

as I was learning this, Stanley's questions and reflections helped me focus on forming responses rather than reacting to what was happening externally in my new family.

The early years of our marriage included living with my husband's two children part-time. If I had been limited to my psychological understanding of my interactions with my stepchildren, my husband and his former wife, I might not have been able to form a deep bond with my husband. I would have explained the dynamics I found myself in from my experiences with and psychological study of groups. I would have worried about triangulations and poor boundaries. I would have understood my reactions to the various family members only in relation to my "family of origin." And I would have been stuck between two choices: To react or to understand, neither of which would have helped me grow myself as an adult woman in a marriage, forming a family.

I remember the time early in our living together that I came home and my husband's former wife's car was taking both spaces in the driveway and she was in the living room with her daughter. I called my husband at work expecting that he should "set the boundaries" with her so this would not happen again. He refused. When I discussed this with Stanley, I learned ways to make this a Formative event for myself. He helped me identify my somatic organization of "being invaded" and find responses I could form to alter repeat occurrences. Some of these responses were intrapersonal and some were interpersonal. All of them were Formative.

From a psychological perspective, I brought fears of abandonment to my relationship with my husband, and his dense structure was a perfect match for me to re-experience these "wounds." When we had conflicts, he withdrew and I panicked as the "abandonment complex" held me in its grip. All the psychological understanding in the world was not going to stop this drama from occurring. We were going to be stuck in a dynamic of polarizations. Learning about our different constitutions and developmental body types helped me to take our conflicts less personally and fearfully, but I still felt and thought about these experiences from my cultural bias of oppositions. (i.e., his body type v. my body type, etc.) When I worked with Stanley he was not at all interested in this dualism drama. Instead, he asked me to experience how I was bodying myself in the conflicts. I began to recognize that I held myself together more tightly than I could sustain. Then I would collapse this holding so completely that I was generating feelings of hopelessness and loss. Anger would erupt in bursts and disappear. I couldn't hold a form long enough to make any changes and I would be caught in the extremes of rigidity and collapse. Gradually, with Stanley's guidance I learned to catch the disorganization of the rigidity in layers of intensity that I could sustain and thereby experience porosity. The feelings of loss and abandonment were

replaced with the pleasure of holding myself, sometimes firmly, sometimes gently. Panic lessened and forming my life as a porous person replaced being lived by rigidity and collapse.

From this Formative perspective, I learned that abandonment was not something that had happened to me in some distant past but rather something I was living in the present. Its genesis was interesting but unimportant to changing my circumstances. Identifying the embodiment of my current behaviors—bracing, softening, extending, contracting—not only gave me tools for changing my experience in the present but also changed how I thought about and understood my experiences of the past. The past and the present come together in how we are bodied. We don't have to search for historical evidence to explain our behaviors, to make sense of ourselves. Everything we need is here, now, available to be experienced, learned from and re-formed through voluntary muscular effort. Our dilemmas are embodied. Formative Psychology explains how bodies are formed and the Bodying Practice gives us a way to experience and participate in our own personal forming. From this perspective, there is no mind-body split, separation, or continuum, only continual forming. Embedded in cultures dominated by this so-called Cartesian split, most of us confuse ourselves with our ideas of what we are and miss our Formative process. Stanley points us to how we are present and by teaching us how we form our own experiences, he helps us to find our own answers to our dilemmas.

I am so grateful to Stanley for his relentless pursuit of understanding things from a biological perspective. In this time, in our history in which dematerialization dominates, Stanley has given us a way to value form and physical experience. From working with Stanley, I have contemplated Einstein's theory of relativity as it applies to being bodied. I have experienced myself pulsating. And I have even generated my own pulsation. He has shown me how our bodies grow our brains and how the brain has crowned itself king and claimed the body as its servant. Descartes' famous words, "I think, therefore, I am" reflect that false coronation as do many practices of mind over matter that have flourished in the West. It is so deeply embedded in our psychological and world views, and we are so in love with understanding, that introducing the somatic, Bodying Practice and perspective of Formative Psychology to clients can be challenging.

Unlike Stanley, I often use the very language that has arisen from duality to explain this work to my clients (This is almost always unsuccessful: Don Quixote chasing windmills comes to mind.). Languaging experience formatively so that we speak from what is present is a practice in itself. Most of us have had the experience of doing the Bodying Practice and not knowing how to articulate our experience. Sometimes I can't tell if I am squeezing or stiffening, or identify what I feel when I make a particular shape. It takes practice knowing ourselves this way and talking about it. Stanley makes it seem easy, yet I know that it has not come without years of effort. He has formed a language to express organismic experiences, which are not accessible from the dualistic language of our social world. I am grateful that he has made this effort and lucky to benefit from his work. I do not have to be lived by our cultural separations of mind and body. I can experience myself as one of many living organisms in a vast biosphere working at the forming of a personal life.

Biography

Christina A. Loeffel, MA, MFT received her Master's Degree with an emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. She has been studying with Stanley Keleman since 1990 and uses Formative Psychology in her psychotherapy practice. She has offices in San Francisco and Marin County, California. Email: caloeffel@hotmail.com