Mindful Movement: Self-Determination for the "Running Ape": A Practice Brief

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Human bodies are made for movement. For example, we are "among Natures [sic] most superbly well-adapted endurance runners" (Kiely, 2017, abstract). Yet, despite much lipservice being paid to the importance of movement for well-being and health, in practice it is grossly neglected in positive psychology. Even Hefferon (2013), who rightly laments the neglect of the body in positive psychology, treats movement only in chapter 9 under the heading of "exercise." In this practice brief, I will argue from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci & Ryan (2000), that certain forms of movement not only contribute to health, but can also be used to further another important goal: That of an integrated self acting from intrinsic motivation. Given the time pressures of modern life, any practices that *at the same time* further physical and psychological health and well-being are of course potentially very useful. They deserve the attention of researchers both in positive psychology and in movement science.

According to Deci and Ryan, self-determination starts from "the postulate that humans are active growth-oriented organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self and integration of themselves into larger social structures" (p. 229). Further, SDT posits that human beings have three basic psychological needs: *Autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*, with experiences of competence and autonomy in particular, being essential for intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, in turn, refers to a highly desirable motivational state with various positive consequences. These involve “people freely engaging in activities that they find interesting, that provide novelty and optimal challenge" (p. 235). These then lead to behaviors "that are freely engaged out of interest without the necessity of separable consequences" (p. 233). Yet, according to Brown & Ryan (2015), despite the importance assigned to (perceived) autonomy and competence in SDT, it appears that research has been preoccupied with social circumstances, instead of providing tools to individuals that enable them to improve on their autonomy.

One way to increase internal resources for self-determination that Brown and Ryan (2015) do mention is *mindfulness practice*. But again, the standard mindfulness-based interventions contain little movement. For example, “mindfulness-based stress reduction,” the basis of most modern MBIs (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), does include mindful Hatha Yoga (Boccio & Feuerstein, 2005) and some walking meditation. But yoga is concerned more with *asanas* (postures) than with movement, while the walking meditation is mostly snail-paced and with little regard for human body functionality. Nor is there a clear relationship between such practice of yoga and the basic needs postulated by SDT.

I suggest that SDT is implicitly a central element in some modern mindful movement practices, most clearly in the *Feldenkrais-Method* (Feldenkrais, 1949; Feldenkrais, 1972; Feldenkrais, 1981; Buchanan, 2012; Mattes, 2016). This is a movement-based method of self-education with

the goal to improve health and well-being as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of one's actions (Mattes, 2016, p.260). This method within itself provides tools to enhance one's autonomy and competence, while at the same time is beneficial for physical health. In Mattes (2016) I noted parallels between "Feldenkrais' idea of mono-motivation and psychological research on the relationship between conflicting goals and well-being" (p. 268). Acting from mono-motivation is also referred to as "acting with your whole self" (compare, e.g., Feldenkrais, 1985, p. 149) - the congruence with SDT is clear.

In Feldenkrais one speaks of "lessons" instead of "exercise" or similar terms, since the emphasis is on how the nervous system organizes movement, rather than on the purely musculoskeletal aspect that is so often dominant in sports and physiotherapy. As an example, a person can begin with isolated movements of body parts, and use carefully chosen movement sequences. This can let them experience where they may obstruct their own movement intentions, either 1) from being stiff in parts that might usefully participate in the movement, or 2) by performing superfluous "parasitic movements" that hinder the intended action. This then can foster a sense of what it might mean to "act with the whole self" (Feldenkrais), "act in a self-determined way" (in SDT terms), or "unify mind and body" (as Zen Buddhists, or practitioners of *aikido* (Lothes, Hakan & Kassab, 2013), might say). Again in line with SDT, letting participants experience acting harmoniously with their whole self is further aided by the radical acceptance of participants' *autonomy* in the Feldenkrais method. A famous dictum of Dr. Feldenkrais is that he does not teach, he creates room for *learning*; the goal is that participants become self-directed learners, where learning is used in a wider sense that encompasses all forms of self-improvement.

The Feldenkrais method thus seems ideally suited to provide tools for people to increase their own sense of autonomy and competence. Simultaneously, this contributes to improved physical health (Worley & Hillier, 2015) along with increased mindfulness with all its positive consequences; on the other hand, *relatedness*, the third basic need postulated in SDT, is only tangentially addressed. This motivates combining the Feldenkrais method with martial arts like aikido, or with the prototypical movement-with-relatedness, familiarly known as *dance*. Unfortunately, to my knowledge at this time, no scientific research on such combinations exists, even though workshops integrating these methods are in fact held by practitioners. In particular, the combination between the Feldenkrais method and Argentine Tango is quite popular. In this context it may be worth pointing out that, though rarely thought of it this way, Argentine Tango is, in fact itself, a form of mindful movement in pairs. Even more so is the form of inclusive tango for people with all levels of abilities, as for example taught by the Tinkers association (http://tinkersinclusion.com/).

In conclusion, the Feldenkrais method and other mindful movement practices, as well as their interconnections and underlying common principles, are highly deserving of increased attention of researchers in areas including positive psychology, mindfulness, movement science, and prevention and therapy.

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