

INTRODUCTION
TO MARTIN'S ARTICLE
'SWEIGARD'S LEGACY: FURTHER EXPLORATIONS INTO BREATHING'

Some of the most complex and yet fundamental questions for an anthropology of human movement involve the ways in which relationships between mind and body and between thought and action are expressed in different cultural traditions. The fascinating article by Lynn Martin (which follows these introductory remarks) presents an intriguing ethnographic example of an attempt within contemporary western society to move beyond the all-pervading Cartesian view of the mind-body relationship.

Martin's article builds upon the exciting work of a remarkable, but little known pioneer, Lulu Sweigard (1895-1974) who trained as an anatomist and physiologist in a very traditional 'hard science' sense and who experimented with the use of mental imagery to effect changes in the neuro-muscular patterning of individuals. Martin's work exemplifies and extends Sweigard's method in its deep challenge to the traditional Cartesian mind-body split.

Sweigard's work, known as 'Ideokinesis' or simply as 'Neuro-Muscular Re-Education' also presents a radical challenge to the accepted rules of physical training which assume that the repeated practise of actions will produce greater efficiency in movement. Cherished notions of 'fitness' and 'good posture', which call for the 'holding' of body parts in line, also come under attack. According to Williams (1981), Sweigard was well-aware of how radically she was departing from such norms, although she was careful to disguise the fact through the use of traditional 'respectable' anatomical language in her only book (Sweigard, 1974).

Her thesis was that ideas in the form of specific mental images used in a disciplined fashion, can alter involuntary neuro-muscular patterning and skeletal alignment to produce optimum efficiency for any human body. To those unfamiliar with modern neuro-physiological research and without direct experience of Sweigard's methods of re-training, such a thesis may seem to belong more in the realm of 'primitive magic' (sophisticated magic, perhaps?) than physiological science, but that is not the case. Unfortunately for us, as Williams notes in her review of Sweigard's book (Williams, 1981), the latter recognised, but was unwilling or unable to deal with either the philosophy of mind or the affective and emotional consequences of her approach, and such work remains to be done.

It is interesting to speculate in how far Sweigard chose to work particularly with dancers (she taught at the famous Juilliard School in New York). She may have done so for two particular reasons. First,

because the highly trained and therefore sensitive bodies of such dancers needed to be as efficient as possible if they were to sustain the hard work and ever-increasing demands made upon them by choreographers of ballet and American modern dancing without serious injury. The dancers themselves were therefore interested in and had the discipline and willingness to work with her. This important cooperative principle is a prerequisite to an ideokinetic approach as an agent-centered method of working with the body, in contrast to the usual doctor or practitioner-centered methods, for example, of massage techniques or chiropractic.

It is also probably true to say that such dancers would be less resistant than the average non-dancing westerner to the idea of combining a disciplined imagination with bodily concerns in the interests of greater efficiency (the notion of such an 'efficiency' itself is a Western ideal). Practitioners of modern dance and the ballet become very familiar with utilising imagery about the body and the space in which it moves. It is consciously evoked through the language of their dance teachers during their years of training and on-going daily practise -- not always to best effect, however, hence the many alignment problems and bad habits of the kind Sweigard was constantly confronted with.

Sweigard, however, was asking these dancers to 'image'; that is, literally to visualise pictures of certain objects and movements along certain lines of direction of the body, and to visualise such images in various places in the body whilst not moving voluntarily at all, but lying still. Only in this way, she believed, could neuro-muscular re-patterning (which is basically involuntary) be altered.

The reader should thus be prepared to meet what may at first appear as distinctly odd and rather disparate usages of language in Martin's article: references to "breathing imagery" and "picture notions" have to be recognised as technical terms. A statement such as "The bucket handles represent the twenty-four half-rib circles that hang suspended between the spine and the sternum" is not pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo of a para-psychological kind. Instead, this is one of the syntagmata of the discourse of a pioneering attempt to reach beyond Cartesianism, which combines traditional anatomical discourse with that required to talk about imagery for a mind-body continuum.

The article itself draws attention to limitations in more traditional forms of discourse and imagery in relation to such complex structures as the diaphragm and rib-cage. Martin's work is full of rich metaphors pertaining to the inner shapes, means of attachment, lines of actions and uses of the imagination, which contrasts strongly with Sweigard's own rather constrained, dry and perhaps necessarily cautious style (if her work was to be given scientific credence at an earlier time).

Biological and Cultural Explanations

In view of the fact that it has been necessary for those of us using a semasiological approach to the study of human actions to emphasize a separation between biological levels of explanation and cultural explanations of the role of human actions, Martin's article may appear as a rather strange inclusion to some of our readers. The purpose of this introduction, therefore, is not only to acknowledge Martin's very real contribution to the development of Sweigard's work but also to explain further the relevance of such work to a semasiological approach in the anthropology of human movement.

The point of the aforementioned separation between biological and cultural explanations has been that descriptions in terms of muscles, bones and nerves cannot provide answers to semantic questions, analogous to the way in which meanings of spoken language utterances cannot be intelligibly discussed in terms of the anatomical structures of the throat and face. This seemingly obvious point is not at all passé.

As recently as 1983, for example, Jackson finds the only alternative to that which he terms "intellectualist" approaches to the body to be one which reduces "bodily praxis" (after Bourdieu, 1979) to pre-linguistic "somatic and biological" levels of explanations. This apparent inability to comprehend human movement itself as non-material (like sound), albeit the product of the physical, is (as a prevailing concept amongst many western academics) itself a fascinating topic worthy of anthropological investigation. It is relevant to our concerns here, because it, too, unsurprisingly perhaps, is rooted in a Cartesian interpretation of the relationship between mind and body.

Our prior insistence upon a clear separation of the biological and cultural should not, however, be interpreted as a lack of interest in the former, nor as a denial of the cultural in the biological, in the sense that it, too, is a culturally produced form of knowledge (See Callan, 1970 and Crick, 1976:100). On the contrary, a thorough knowledge of the principles of anatomy, physiology and kinesiology are deemed essential to an anthropology of human movement for many reasons, not the least of which is a recognition that such knowledges comprise a classification scheme which holds a privileged place in western societies. Biological classifications are given more 'value' (in the Saussurian sense); they are considered to be more 'real' or 'basic' than other 'non-scientific' classifications (See Williams, 1980).

Of major importance also is the understanding of relationships between anatomical and physiological knowledge and classifications of the body such as are found in theoretical constructs such as the 'semasiological body' and the 'law of hierarchical motility' (Williams, 1976), as well as those encoded by the movement script, Labanotation. The biological knowledge is required in order fully to understand how the latter act as constructs which acknowledge the anatomical structure of the body but which provide for non-biological knowledges of the movement produced by such a structure.

It is, in addition, surely necessary that in a reflexive anthropology, we become thoroughly aware of our own culture's anthropology of the body and its relationship to mind, prior to, or in conjunction with, our attempts to articulate those of other societies and their systems of human movement.

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