



Polarizing or integrating differences?

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About the author:

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Abstract - 150 words

Tracking and modifying defensive muscle-response – either tension or giving up/low energy – is presented as a way to regulate arousal-states awakened when transitioning into new contexts – like a conference. Focus is given to reactions from both branches of the autonomic nervous-system: Hyper- and hypo-arousal.

One-up and one-down behaviour is held bodily by the muscular patterns of tension and low energy. Modifying them can open up new choices in how we behave in relationship to ourselves and the outer context.

The inner system-dynamic between tension and giving up is addressed – pointing to patterns of polarization between differences inside of us and amongst us. Tense parts can polarize to given up parts both in the muscle-system and in the nervous-system and vice versa, resulting in patterns of exclusion/inclusion of parts of ourselves and others.

Observing these patterns of polarization can widen our self-image and support a fuller presence with more integration of differences.

This article presents concepts and thinking that lie behind the opening experiential presentation I did at the EABP conference in Cambridge in September 2012. The presentation is available on video at www.moaiku.com - or you can purchase it from the EABP website. The presentation itself - in written form - is part of this article.

I have worked in the field of body psychotherapy since 1978, when I finished a 3 year training in psychomotor therapy. The concept of muscle response presented in this article (hyper- hypo- and balanced response) was a key element in that training and also in the creation of Bodydynamic Analysis, which I took part in from 1982 and on. (Macnaughton, 2004; Marcher & Fich, 2010). In 2003 I left the Bodydynamic group and have since then worked on refining what I call 'Resource Oriented Skill Training' as a psychotherapeutic method to reach into dissociative patterns. Key in this process has been clarifying and integrating the principle of "dosing"¹ into psychomotor skill training (Brantbjerg, 2007 and 2008), and with that adapting the method to include regulation of both extremes in the autonomic nervous system – hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal.²

In 2006 I started being trained in SCT – Systems Centered Therapy³ – and I am still attending training. I have integrated methods, language, and perspectives from SCT into my work and adapted it to my goals. Today I am seeing the process of opening up dissociative patterns from both a body oriented and a systems oriented perspective. I am equally focused on training groups in becoming capable of mutually regulating what has been held in dissociation – as I am focused on training individual regulatory skills through specific body awareness.

The presentation I did in Cambridge touched on key aspects of the methodology I have developed over the last 10 years.

¹ 'Dosing' is the word I have chosen to name the process of adapting psychomotor skill training to each individual and to support inner authority. 'Dosing' means to explore how you can do a body activity like a psychomotor exercise in a way that actually increases your presence – how big or small, how long time, how slow or fast does it make sense for your body to do a movement?? The crucial part of this process is for most people to open up the possibility of dosing low, even very low, which means doing exercises or activations in micro ways. To include this possibility makes it possible to approach and include given up muscles and fascia, which in my experience supports containment of hypo-arousal = collapse. (Brantbjerg, 2007 and 2008)

² Hyper-arousal is predominant in survival reactions like flight, fight, protection, or attachment cry. Hypo-arousal is predominant in collapse, getting ready to die, dissociation, disintegration. Other survival reactions hold a strong activation in both branches in the ANS – this goes for the freeze response – and from my experience, also the separation scream.

³ To get information about SCT, you can go to www.systemscentered.com

The invitation

In June 2011 I was asked if I would do an opening experiential presentation at the EABP conference the following year. I accepted the invitation.

I had a clear sense right away what I would like to do in the presentation. Based on a previous experience at a conference where I had guided the audience into skills that could support transitioning out of a conference⁴, I wanted to support the audience to get into presence in the transition into this conference. My decision was also based on the fact that psychomotor skill training used to regulate arousal states is my core competency.

In that sense the task was easy to take on. And still I used quite some time consciously and unconsciously for preparing myself from June 2011 to Sept 2012.

The process of getting present in the conference context - which was the goal of the presentation – started for me with accepting to do the presentation. In my preparation I went through the same aspects as the presentation held – aspects that I see as natural elements in any transition into a new context.

Transitions between contexts hold a certain level of stress – they challenge our presence and our capacity to take up membership inside ourselves and in the context we step into.

How do I get myself into the new context and out of the one I come from? Which parts of myself do I habitually exclude or include in this process – and how is this exclusion/inclusion process impacted by the context I am stepping into – or out of?

Habitual defensive solutions are easily called to the foreground to cope with the challenge – solutions that are represented bodily in inner dynamics between controlling, giving up, or just filling out life energy, emotions and impulses. When entering a context we can control some parts of us, give up other parts, be naturally filled out in third parts – and all of that as a response to the outer context or our predictions or projections about it.⁵

A professional conference is a context that holds many naturally asymmetrical roles – and that easily invites one-up or one-down styles in how we manage the asymmetry and how we relate to each other in general.⁶

How do we relate to all the similarities and differences amongst us in a field of professionals with different degrees of experience, influence, status, knowledge? How do we get present and take up membership in that kind of context instead of behaving from our habitual defensive roles?

Preparatory process – stepping into the context

My negotiation with one-up and one-down roles and finding my way into a more balanced presence started when I got the invitation. I will share different elements in my preparation process – and I invite the reader to participate in this. You can think of a time – either now or earlier in your life, where you prepared yourself for stepping into a highly intensive context – and find your version of the steps I describe.

My primary preparation for the presentation was to deal openly in myself with the role-inductions I felt, both from other people and from myself:

My presentation was announced at the webpage for a year, parallel to presentations by Daniel Stern and Stephen Porges, who are both known international names in the field of psychotherapy. The three of us were to do the three opening plenary presentations at the conference.

I felt an invitation into going one-up: Feeling flattered, feeling important, 'Look at me, I am being presented as a match to Daniel Stern and Stephen Porges. I matter in the field' – etc

And I immediately felt the opposite position – the invitation into going one-down: Feeling unrealistically exposed, losing my worth, 'Look at me, I am ridiculous standing there on line with experts that I don't match. I am worthless' – etc.

⁴ The mentioned conference took place in Cambridge, England in Sept. 2007 and was titled 'The Client and I: Relational Dilemmas and Opportunities in Psychotherapy'.

⁵ Controlling/tensing, giving up and being naturally filled out are every day language for three kinds of muscle response – hyper-reponse, hypo-reponse and balanced response. These concepts were first clarified at the psychomotor training school (Skolen for Kroppsdynamik) in the 1970s – and later integrated into Bodydynamic Analysis. (Macnaughton, 2004; Bernhardt & Isaacs, 2000; Marcher & Fich, 2010, p. 6)

⁶ My use of the concepts of one-up and one-down roles come from different sources. SCT is working systematically with 'rolelocks', focusing on how typical one-up and one-down roles play out in different phases of groupdevelopment, the first phase being the 'Authority phase'. (Agazarian, 2004, p. 221-226) My own focus on the principle of dosing is a practical way of addressing authority issues in psychomotor skill training and with that supporting shared responsibility between therapist and client, building a different pathway than the automatic one-up/one-down dynamics. (Brantbjerg, 2007 and 2008) In my work with 'Authority and Trauma', I focus on one-up/one-down dynamics interwoven with trauma patterns. I am building on references both from animal psychology, (Jørgensen, 2010) attachment theory (Heard & Lake, 1997) and SCT (Agazarian, 2004).

Every time I felt these invitations into stuck roles, I used time for finding a reality based position again: I checked what happened in my body. Where did I go tense? And where did I lose energy and fullness? A typical answer would be that I went tense (hyper-responsive) in my upper body, lifting shoulders, contracting the superficial layer of my diaphragm, holding very tight with my right hand to be able to push through, tensing the outside of my thighs and hips and with that closing my boundaries. The tensions would compensate for a loss of energy (hypo-response) in the depth of my core, in my inner thighs and pelvic floor, in the deep layer of the diaphragm, in some of my chest muscles and the muscles on the sides of my ribcage – muscles that hold skills around centering, selfworth, arousal regulation and connectedness. (Marcher & Fich, 2010, p. 451; Brantbjerg & Ollars, 2006; Brantbjerg, 2005)

In that body position fear will accelerate. If you think of doing a presentation in front of hundreds of people and you cannot feel your own fullness in your center, your solar plexus and your connection to other people, you are at high risk of overwhelm – and then a solution is to increase your tension to compensate, hold yourself together, push through, perform. You have moved from containing and managing the emotions that naturally will awaken in that situation – to a defensive coping style. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)⁷

I observed the defensive body patterns, named them to myself – and then I became curious about which of them were negotiable most easily. An example could be: I noticed my feet and their contact to the ground. That helped to start releasing some of the tension in my shoulders and breathing. I brought attention in a gentle way to my core, doing a micro cross-movement to activate the psoas muscle⁸. I imagined a hand on the back of my solar plexus area, giving me a tiny little physical support. I felt a gentle widening horizontally on my inbreath. Other areas where I had lost energy started getting filled out again by themselves. The tensions had by then become negotiable – their compensatory strategy was no longer necessary.

This kind of muscular adjustment encourages getting out of the bodily aspect of the stuck one-up and one-down positions – and supports getting into a reality based presence.

Orienting into the situation from there clarified that:

I have been asked to do what I know I am experienced in doing. That is the task I have signed up for – nothing more, nothing less.

It is the choice of the conference organizers to include an experiential presentation as one out of three plenary presentations to open the conference.

I know I will bring in a difference based on the fact that plenary presentations typically are done with powerpoints. I will do a bodily guiding.

I felt fear, excitement and joy.⁹

I went through this kind of sequence many times during the year leading up to the conference. Each time strengthening my capacity to observe and know from within the difference between being in a stuck one-up or one-down position or being in a position where I had my skills and orienting in reality available as I imagined myself presenting. Heard & Lake call this shifting between 2 relational systems: Dominance-submission and Supportive companionable. (Heard & Lake, 1997, p. 34)The goals of the 2 systems are different. When we interact based in dominance-submission the goal is survival and positioning in a hierarchy that is fighting about territory, valued objects, status, influence or perception of reality. When we interact based in Supportive companionable relating the goal is to explore, orient in reality, mutually regulate arousal and emotions, stay even as human beings, fill out task related roles (that can be asymmetrical or symmetrical), and repair if resonance has been broken.¹⁰

As human beings we have both relational systems in our biology and in our socialization. (Heard & Lake, 1997, p. 34-35) That gives us a challenge – and it gives us potential choices.

⁷ Another way to address the stuck patterns would have been to track the thought patterns I went into which would very likely hold negative predictions or negative assumptions about myself and the context. That could open up to acknowledging the pattern (parallel to acknowledging hyper- and hypo-response in the body) and then invite awareness back into the body in the present moment. For me it is an ongoing curiosity what difference it makes if we undo the body aspects or the verbal/cognitive aspects of a stuck pattern first. I know both are powerful and that it is relevant to be able to address both. I also know that my preference for undoing the bodily aspects first makes sense given my focus on dissociative patterns. In high stress and trauma patterns our cognitive capacity is reduced. Focusing on the body is more available than words.

⁸ The psoas muscle is situated in the depth of the abdomen, connecting the lower spine with the thighs. Activity in this muscle stimulates sensation of the physical balance point right in front of L4-5.

⁹ For me the modification bodily of the stuck roles was enough to gain access to my orienting into reality skills. The verbal/cognitive aspect of the stuck roles let go by themselves when the body position was changed. That doesn't always happen. Another important step can then be to modify the verbal/cognitive aspect. This process is called: Modifying negative predictions in SCT. (Agazarian, 2004, p. 154)

¹⁰ In the description of the goals of the two relational systems I have gathered information from different sources (see note 6), and experiences from many of my own training groups.

When the conference came closer and I started the preparation of what I would actually do in the presentation, my arousal went up – naturally. I felt the reality of the upcoming standing alone on a stage in front of an audience – including people I know, people I don't know, people I have old complex relationships with, etc. I felt the invitation into 'feeling exposed and all alone', which I recognize as going one-down.

It's a reality that I would bring something that represents a difference into the conference, and with that potentially touch on automatic group dynamic patterns of how people relate to differences. It is also a reality that I would be standing alone facing the audience. The aloneness was the trigger that invited me to the edge of 'feeling exposed and helpless' beforehand, by taking my natural arousal too personally.

I reminded myself that the arousal wasn't just mine – many people were preparing, signing up, organizing, longing or dreading related to the conference. The big conference system was starting to form – and with that an energetic sharing of energy and feelings between many people.

I realized that the bodily regulation process described above was no longer enough to handle the arousal level I felt. I needed to tap into a bigger container – I needed contact – or in a different language – I needed a bigger system to contain the arousal with me.

The solution I found was to orient a number of people in my personal and professional network about the fact that I was in the process of preparing this presentation. I told them that I just wanted them to know this and asked them to think of me now and then. That choice had an immediate impact on my arousal level. I didn't try to regulate it only bodily – I also let the arousal be held in a bigger container. I stepped into supportive companionable relating, and I got space to contain my fear, excitement, joy and other emotions both with myself and with others.

This clarified for me what kind of concrete support I wanted: Going through my plan for the presentation beforehand with a colleague. I didn't want to be saved (one-down) or be admired (one-up) – I wanted to share my plan, try it out beforehand, get feedback from someone whom I trust professionally and personally. I did so – and it left me with a more embodied sense of the presentation and much more relief. This led me to know that I could do the presentation without a manuscript, which I prefer.

The above described preparatory process holds in it the same elements that are in the presentation:

- Acknowledging the challenge of transitioning into a new context – in this case a conference
- Orienting in factual outer and inner reality
- Tracking signs of tension (hyper-response) in the body as a habitual solution to natural arousal and emotions aroused by the new context
- Tracking signs of giving up/low energy (hypo-response) in the body as a habitual solution to natural arousal and emotions aroused by the new context
- Tracking signs of habitual defensive roles – one-up or one-down – held by tension and low energy in the body.
- Modifying tension and low energy bodily as a way of negotiating the habitual defensive solutions.
- Normalizing and integrating both tension and low energy as defensive strategies and seeing how they cooperate to keep us in stuck roles.
- Normalizing and containing natural emotional responses to stepping into the new context – and looking for ways to contain them individually and mutually.

All in all, the elements represent an invitation to become present in the here and now and own the choice between relating from dominant/submissive positions – or from a supportive companionable position.

The presentation itself

The presentation in Cambridge had different steps that match the above named elements. I will go through the steps and widen the elements conceptually. In each step the presentation itself is cited in italics followed by my comments. Minor changes have been made in the citation to make it more readable.

1. Acknowledging the challenge of transitioning into a conference – Clarifying goal and inviting mutuality, curiosity and slowing down.

I was asked to do an experiential presentation, to be part of opening this conference. Now what does that mean? Well, it means that I am not going to give you a lot of my thinking. I'm inviting you to explore what it means to transition into a context like this. This is a process we are in the middle of right now. Up to now we have mostly done it by listening to one person talking.¹¹

What I'm inviting now is a process that is more mutual, where you and I together can explore the challenge that it actually is, to get ourselves across the boundary into this room. That process doesn't happen by itself, or you could say it does, but if we let it just happen automatically, we will likely all do it in our habitual roles. The chance we have right now is to slow this process down, so that we take the time, to be curious about: What does it actually mean to transition into a conference?

The goal of this introduction is to acknowledge that the group is in a transition, that this holds a certain amount of challenge, and to normalize it and invite curiosity and exploration. Said in a different language, the goal is to optimize safety, so curiosity and exploratory impulses become available.

Attachment theory points out that children as well as adults shift between having our exploratory behaviour and our safety-seeking behaviour in the foreground, depending on the level of threat or stress we perceive or interpret (Bowlby, 1998). If we feel threatened or stressed, one option is to seek safety. For children – especially young ones - seeking safety is the primary strategy to regulate stress. We also learn other survival strategies¹² and coping mechanisms, and later in life choices of which survival strategy suits us best in a threatening or stressful situation happen most often unconsciously. As adults we will typically unconsciously cope with a stressful situation by going into habitual defensive one-up or one-down roles. If we are aware of what is happening, it is possible for us to acknowledge our arousal reactions and to make conscious choices to optimize our feeling of safety. When we are in the defensive roles we lose access to free choices of how we take up membership in the situation.

In the preparation of the presentation I kept reminding myself that it was not my task to 'teach' – my task was to invite everybody including myself into more presence. To teach would have invited me into a more asymmetrical interaction – I know something – and I want you to get it'. I felt how that position sneaked me into a one-up role.

I chose consciously to include myself in the process of getting present – 'we are in this together'. My hypothesis is that my stepping into equality this way, supported a freer choice for group members of how they would respond to my suggestions – and that it gave easier access to curiosity and exploration. And so did slowing down. As long as we stay in a high speed, it is difficult and often impossible to find new ways of doing things. We work on automatic – and with that our habitual one-up or one-down styles come to the foreground. Slowing down opens up the possibility of sensing more, becoming more aware of possible choices in the situation.

¹¹ There were three previous speakers, saying hello and introducing the conference.

¹² Different lists of survival strategies have been made by different approaches to trauma and stress work. The most familiar ones are flight, fight and freeze/immobilizing. In my approach to trauma therapy I have widened the list, inspired by Porges (2011), Perry (1995), Lanius (2003 and 2006), Ogden (2006), and my own and my co-trainers' observations when working with high stress and trauma-patterns. The list includes: Orientation reflex, Startle reflex, Attachment cry, Flight, Fight, Freeze, Collapse/hypo-arousal, Protecting others, Dominance behavior, Submissive behavior, Disintegrated rage/dominance, Disintegrated submission. (Brantbjerg & Jørgensen, 2011)

2. Orienting in factual outer reality – orienting to similarities and differences.

So, this context has two sides.

There is an external context and there is an internal context.

I start with orienting to the external context.

This is a conference that is dealing with body psychotherapy.

It's also a conference that has a specific goal, which is to go beyond the individual. It says in the conference flyer: we want to go beyond the individual and deal with not only one body, but deal with two bodies together, or a whole room full of bodies, or a whole world full of bodies.

It happens to be like this, that we are right now a room full of bodies.

That's the context we're in.

So the first thing I ask you to do is to orient to the room.

Look around and see that we're sitting here – and I know it's a challenge because you're all sitting in lines, which means that it's easier to see me than to see the group.

I actually ask you to turn around and see this room full of bodies.

And while you have turned around, I ask you to also see the room.

We're in a specific room that impacts us in different ways. It has a height, it has a size. Take in those two parts of reality, right now, which is that we are in this specific room and there are a lot of bodies here.

Check out what happens by just taking in that reality.

Now in a room full of bodies there will be a lot of similarities and there will be a lot of differences. The previous speaker just addressed all the polarities you invited us to explore during the conference.

Polarities are always present in a group of people.

I invite you to start with the similarities.

One of the big similarities is that we all have a body. That's a very simple one. Another obvious similarity here is that we all chose to come. We sit here out of free will. Sit or stand. This means that we all have some interest in body psychotherapy.

That's the big similarity that gathers us all.

Again I ask you to just take in and taste that similarity right now, maybe look around or sense it in your selves. Something matters enough to each of us, that we have actually all chosen to be here.

Take this moment to notice, what does that do in your body to orient from that similarity? First of all I sense that I get quieter when I do that, something is quieting down. And also something gets broader in me, I get less focused, but I sense the broadness of the whole field.

It is also a reality that there are many differences present here. I'll just name some of them and you can add. We come from different countries; there are a lot of different languages represented here. I don't speak my native language right now, which you can probably hear in my accent. There are many different traditions in our professional field represented. We have different levels of experience. Some may be very new in this field, some may come here mostly out of curiosity, maybe coming from other fields, others have been here for a number of years and others have been here for many years. So there is a range of experience in the room. And with that there's also a range of different roles amongst us: trainers and students, maybe clients and therapists, supervisors and supervisees, etc. There will be people you know, people you don't know, there will be some you feel close to, some you feel distant from... and you can add, you can keep adding to that list yourselves.

What I ask you to do now is to either just sense it in yourselves or look around and orient from that place. See the complexity in this field, all the differences, within the similarity.

Now notice if it's different to orient to the differences than it was to the similarities.

You would be very normal if it is. Differences challenge us. Differences are more challenging for most groups of people than similarities are.

Did you notice a difference?

Getting oriented has two directions: inwards and outwards. It involves picking up factual information from our inner context (body sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc.) and from the outer context we are in (room, temperature, people, etc.).

Which do you do first? And why?

The highest risk when we orient is that we don't see and sense factual reality – we see and sense our own interpretations, predictions and assumptions instead. We colour the outside and inside reality with our emotionally loaded expectations based on previous experiences.

How do we get out of that very human mechanism and into a willingness to discover this very moment inwardly and outwardly – and collect factual data?

In this presentation I chose to focus on the external context first. I invited a focus on concrete reality – seeing the bodies and seeing the room.

My hypothesis was that if we had started with orienting inwards – to the body – the sensations could be highly impacted by the predictions and interpretations we unconsciously make when stepping into an intense new context. I wanted to invite all of us out of that first – by just simply seeing the room and the group of bodies in that very moment.

In other contexts that are known to the participants, I typically start a 'getting present' process with focusing on the body.

I have discovered over the years that both sequences have their benefits and their challenges, and that it depends on both the outer and the inner context as to which has the best chance for inviting more presence. You need both orientation channels to open to really get present – but the sequence can vary. For some people, letting go of the outer context to begin with and focus on body sensations, invites a deepening into themselves and with that a more present state to see the outer context from. For others – for example traumatized clients – (or anxious conference participants, or experienced conference participants) – starting with the body can bring them directly to sensations connected to old contexts instead of getting present now. In that case it is more functional to orient to the outer context first – take in that this is where we are right now – in this room, with this other person, or this group of people.

Another aspect of getting oriented in a group of people is to acknowledge the fact that there are both similarities and differences to orient to. Some of them are obvious and visible.

Similarities and differences are key elements in contact between human beings. We have fast, automatic – and most often – unconscious reactions to both. We orient to them no matter if we do it consciously or not.

Looking for similarities is a way of looking for safety. Is there someone like me here – or am I all alone in my version of being human? Is there someone I can share my experience with, so we can regulate it mutually? We form stereotypical subgroups in the early steps of organizing ourselves in groups. (Same profession, Same language, Women with high-heeled shoes, etc.) (Agazarian, 2004, p. 42-43) – and sometimes we get stuck there. A stereotypical subgroup doesn't provide deeper safety or recognition. To get that, we need to express more clearly what we want to be joined in and find the one's that can join us with versions of experience that are close enough to ours. Being similar in a deeper way includes individuality – being similar with individual variations.

Differences challenge us in other ways. Is there space for both sides of a difference? Or does difference mean fight and exclusion of one side? Differences very easily call out polarization in our way of communicating, and also in subtle ways. Polarization can start just by saying: Yes, I hear that, but I think this is important too. This communication style already holds a polarization and potential fight between differences – and is not helpful in terms of getting space for the difference.

So how can we build a group where group members feel safe by experiences being included – which can lead to curiosity about and inclusion of differences?

Yvonne Agazarian – the founder of Systems Centered Therapy – has together with her colleagues developed a method called Functional subgrouping. (Agazarian, 2004, p. 41-62) I am inspired by this method in the way I lead groups.

In Functional subgrouping you organize communication in a group so similarities meet first and form subgroups - before differences are brought in openly. Choosing that sequence stops the human tendency to go into polarization as soon as differences emerge. It slows down the speed in which differences are brought in – and with that the group's capacity to integrate and include differences grows.

Forming functional subgroups supports the process of mutual regulation of both arousal states and emotions. Whatever experience you are having, if you can find a subgroup to share it with, you are no longer alone in the job of both exploring and regulating the experience.

Based on this methodology, I chose in the presentation to invite orientation to similarities in the group first. Given the timeframe I only focused on obvious similarities in the group – we all have a body, and we have all chosen to come to the conference, which means that we all have an interest in body psychotherapy. I was amazed to sense in myself the impact it had on me to do that simple orientation. My hyper-arousal went down, and I opened up to the group.

In the preparation process I had many thoughts, concerns, fears and wishes about relationships I have with friends, colleagues, former colleagues, etc. in the group of people who attended the conference. When I got the idea of focusing on the similarities first, all that activity in me settled more. It became easier for me beforehand to open up to the group, knowing that I had a similarity with everyone in the room, no matter other aspects of the relationships. The principle of seeing similarities first had an impact.

Naming all the differences present in the room in a neutral language was the next step in the presentation. Not naming the potential difficulties all these differences can awaken in us, just naming that differences in language, experience, professional roles, influence etc are real. They are part of the context. And they impact us.

Differences easily invite habitual defensive solutions. How do we get a freer choice?

One of the things I have noticed is that differences tend to invite our habitual solutions. Habitual solutions are for some of us to go a little 'one down'; to not think too highly of ourselves. A conference like this could invite that, easily. We step into this, we need to do a lot of fast choices out there in the registration, orient ourselves to a complex context.

Some of us will have a habitual tendency to get overwhelmed or put ourselves down in that. Others of us will have a habitual solution which is: I'm on top of this. I get a little tough inside and stay 'one up'. This is normal. We all do it. We can't deny or change or remove that part of our psychology. It's there, it will be there in all groups. But it is not all of us. It's one part of us, it's one part of the relational field. We also have another possibility, which has a freer choice in it.

By 'habitual solutions' I mean automatic defense patterns in the personality.¹³ We all have them as part of how we cope with life – some of them are so automatic that we hardly know when they are active, we are identified with them – and others of them are negotiable, meaning that it is possible to become aware of the patterns, aware of how they show up in the body through tension and low energy.

Normalizing that the 'habitual solutions' are in the room is in my experience both relieving and challenging. We can get out of either romanticizing or dreading the situation and into looking more realistically at what likely is going on in a big group of people gathering at a professional conference, a context that will always hold dynamics around authority, competition, status, influence, inclusion and exclusion, closeness and distance. Like in all groups.

The goal of our habitual styles of going one-up or one-down is to survive in a social hierarchy, a way of adapting to a social context. When those positions are governing our behaviour, we are no longer just seeing the here and now context. We are relating to all the previous contexts where we have used going one-up or one-down to survive and adapt.

How do we get more flexibility into that choice – the choice of how we relate to an outer context that holds both similarities and challenging differences?

¹³ In the Bodydynamic tradition automatic defense patterns in the personality are called character structures. (Marcher & Fich, 2010, p. 353) The same concept is used in Bioenergetic Analysis. In SCT the parallel concept is called 'locked roles' (Agazarian, 2004, p. 223) In this presentation I used the concept 'habitual solutions' to keep a light tone and not trigger deep reactions. The goal was just to get present.

3. Tracking body sensations in general – orienting in factual inner reality – and through that getting access to freer choice

So the question for me is: How do we access that freer choice? I think that's where body awareness can offer something that can support shifting between the two ways of relating. That's why I'm going to guide you into body awareness right now.

I want us to get a sense of how we can come to a choice of how we step into this conference. Do I do it from my habitual roles or do I do it from a freer choice, where I have access to more parts of me? Also the parts that I typically would leave behind. We all do that. We leave parts of us behind when we step into a context.

So, I ask you to shift your attention to your body and notice how you are sitting on your chair. How are you doing on your chair? It's always a negotiation between a body and a chair. So please, step into that negotiation. How can you optimize your own awareness on your chair? What possibilities are there? Can you sit a little differently, can you shift your weight, can you shift how you get support from the back? Small adjustments, but they may make a difference to what parts of your body you have access to.

Then I ask you to just notice if that made a difference, just to make those small adjustments? Did that make any difference to how you are in contact with yourself right now?

Tracking and naming concrete body sensations supports getting oriented in the here and now reality. Sensations of coldness or warmth, resting or moving, tight or loose, fullness or absence, high energy or low energy, etc. are part of factual reality in the body. Noticing and naming them grounds you in the here and now.

It matters to differentiate between concrete sensations and emotionally loaded experiences in the body (Brantbjerg, 2007). If you just ask people what they feel in the body you will often hear an undifferentiated language, where sensations, emotions and thought patterns (predictions, assumptions, etc.) are mingled together. At the start of the conference it could have been language like: 'This is great', 'I am not quite here', 'I don't feel welcome', 'I am out of myself', 'I am flying, I am high', etc. represented in outer or inner voices. Each of these statements¹⁴ can be differentiated into concrete sensations, basic emotions and thought patterns that probably hold either negative or positive predictions about the conference. For example:

"This is great" – could contain 'I have a slight vibration in my whole body, especially in my stomach. I feel excited, both uncertain/fearful and curious. I notice that my thoughts go into the future with positive predictions about the conference. I am curious what will happen'. Or 'I don't feel welcome' could contain – 'I am tense in my lower body, especially the outside of my thighs, and my upper body has lower energy, especially my arms. I am holding my breath. I am sinking inwards in my solar plexus. I am scared. My thoughts are going into negative predictions about the conference and the people who are here. The predictions make me more scared.'

In both cases acknowledging the thought patterns of going into the future could open up the possibility of inviting awareness back into the present moment and regulating fear or excitement in the body in the here and now – and after that discovering if emotions emerge.

The undifferentiated language doesn't ground you in here and now reality. It invites you to stay in your habitual role-solutions. Differentiating the language into observations of what is going on in the body, emotionally and cognitively, orients you to the here and now and from there curiosity can open up about what the future will bring.

In the presentation I invited concrete body sensing by introducing the possibility of 'negotiating your relationship with the chair'. Framing it that way focuses awareness in both outer and inner factual reality: What kind of chair is available, how is your body responding to it – and what options do you have in that relationship for optimizing your presence through awareness in your body?

This language invites us out of habitual roles like complaining about or unconsciously adapting to a chair that may not fit the body optimally – which would imply going either one-up or one-down to the chair. Said in a different language: We train ourselves in choosing a supportive-companionable relationship between the body and the outer context represented by the chair through noticing concrete body sensations and exploring possible adjustments bodily.

¹⁴ In SCT this type of verbal language is called 'frames' (Agazarian, 2004). In ACT – Acceptance and Commitment therapy they use the concept 'fusion'. (Hayes et al, 2006) I use the concept 'categorizing language' and 'thoughtfeelings'. All of these concepts are naming a similar phenomenon: Verbal language can lock factual information about inner or outer reality together with emotions or arousal states and cognitive interpretations, assumptions etc. This is a kind of verbal language that keeps us identified with our stuck roles.

4. How do we keep parts of ourselves out of the context? The concept of muscle response.

The next question I'm asking you is: How do we keep parts of ourselves out of the context? We can do that in two different ways.

This sequence acknowledges the fact that we have defensive coping styles that keep parts of us out of consciousness. We leave parts of us behind when we step into contexts. We adapt or respond - most often without knowing it - either to the norms in the outer context or to our interpretation of them. We solve factual or assumed dilemmas between ourselves and the outer world by reducing availability to aspects of ourselves – through either controlling/contracting or going into low energy, or a combination. These coping styles are represented both in the body and in the mind.

My approach is to build awareness about the patterns through increased body awareness first, and with that open up a new possibility of a more embodied presence. Later I address how verbal language also plays a role in staying in the new pattern or being pulled back into the old.¹⁵

Controlling/contracting patterns show up in muscles or connective tissue as tension, which in body psychotherapy – and also in general - is a widely known and described defensive strategy.¹⁶ Tension is often connected to unpleasant sensations and with that it calls for attention.

Giving up – or going into low energy - in muscles or connective tissue is less described as a normal defensive strategy and it is more challenging to build awareness of.¹⁷ Low energized parts of the body don't call for attention. Tracking them is to sense what is missing, what is not there, which is harder for most people than to track what is too much (tension).

The Bodydynamic tradition uses the concept 'muscle response'. (Macnaughton, 2004, p. 163; Marcher & Fich, 2010, p. 6) Muscles can respond in three different ways to the meeting between an individual and an outer context which will then show up in three different ways when the muscle is being approached in touch. The three kinds of muscle response are:

Balanced response where psychomotor impulses and emotions connected to the muscle are available to consciousness – ready to be used in managing contact with self and outer contexts. In balanced response a muscle has a natural fullness – we feel filled out.

Hyper-response equals tensing, controlling, contracting, holding back impulses and emotions – and through that solving dilemmas between the individual and outer contexts. A hyper-responsive muscle feels hard, overmobilized, pumped, closed – life energy gets held in a closed container.

Hypo-response equals giving up, losing energy, going into low energy, going flaccid in impulses and emotions - and through that solving dilemmas between the individual and outer contexts. A hypo-responsive muscle feels vacant, not filled out, sleepy, distant, low energized, flaccid – life energy gets held in a too loose, vague container.¹⁸

¹⁵ Different psychotherapeutic approaches have different strategies around the sequence between addressing the body aspect and the cognitive aspect of a defensive pattern. The cognitively oriented approaches address the verbal language first – and often expect that the body will follow. As a body psychotherapist who is working on awareness of dissociative patterns, I work the other way around – starting with addressing the body aspect. My experience is that it is possible to open up new choices through negotiating bodily held defensive patterns precisely. This is working 'bottom up'. I also acknowledge the importance of addressing the verbal aspect of how the patterns are held. If that is not addressed, the habitual verbal language will invite the person back into the defensive pattern. Starting with confronting verbal patterns is working 'top-down'.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Reich, a primary inspiration for many body psychotherapeutic approaches, put focus on armouring in the body and how to release the held back life energy.

¹⁷ Norwegian psychomotor physiotherapists (Lillemor Johnsen, 1976, Berit Heir Bunkan a.o) have since the late 1940s included hypotonicity in muscles in their work.

¹⁸ Muscle response and muscle tonicity isn't the same. A hypo-responsive muscle can be physically trained and by that be toned and feel hard. An example can be a runner who has physically trained muscles in his calves but who is given up in his access to the psychomotor impulses in the same muscles – impulses that involve standing up for yourself, holding your ground. (Marcher & Fich, 2010)

In the presentation I used everyday language to talk about muscle response. Tension, controlling, low energy, flaccidity, giving up are all words that speak directly to a bodily recognition, whereas hyper- and hypo-response speak more to a cognitive understanding.¹⁹ I will keep using the everyday language in this article, looking for the words that hold most neutrality in the description of the phenomenon – and I will also refer to the concepts of muscle response. A benefit of using hypo- and hyper-response is, that these are neutral words – and they ground both reactions in a theory. Words like 'giving up' has a risk of being emotionally loaded, which can make it harder to normalize and include the pattern.

In the paragraph about my preparation process I already gave examples of how you can track both tension and low energy in the body – and how you can modify both strategies and with that invite yourself back into more presence, containment and awareness of what is going on in you.

In the next 2 paragraphs you can read how tracking and modifying both tension and low energy happened in the presentation.

5. Tracking signs of tension (hyper-response) in the body - as a habitual solution to natural arousal and to emotions aroused by transitioning into a new context – a conference.

How do we keep parts of ourselves out of the context? We can do that in two different ways.

One of them is we can tense up different places in the body. So I ask you to track, where are you tense in your body right now?

Typical places, - is it in your shoulders, in your back, your legs, your hands, your jaws? Tensions will be there in all of us.

I have a constant negotiation with my right shoulder.

How many of you discovered tension in shoulders? Just hands up. Okay.

How many of you discovered tension in your backs? Ok, another subgroup.

And how many of you discovered tension around your breathing, diaphragm, stomach?

And please include yourselves with the other places. There can be a lot of other versions.

Modifying tension bodily as a way of negotiating the habitual defensive solutions.

Now what could we do with this reality, that there is tension in the body?

We could gently invite some letting go.

So what I'm asking you now is to allow your body to drop down into the chair. Sense your feet on the floor. And check out what it feels like to just drop down into your feet, into contact with the ground, the floor and also down into your sitting bones.

For some of you it may work to do small movements on your sitting bones, small circular movements to just get you down there.

Some of you get a natural yawn from that. That is a sign that a regulation happens in the autonomic nervous system, that we move from some sympathetic activation into more rest.

Check out what this feels like for you. Are there parts of you that became present by dropping down like this, parts of you that hadn't arrived yet?

I notice that my breathing got easier. I also notice that my whole speed went down.

The goal of the guiding was to invite modification of tension and with that to increase here-and-now presence. One sign that the group moved towards that goal was that yawning was released spontaneously, showing that a regulation of sympathetic arousal had happened. What were the active components in the guiding?

We tracked concrete sensations of tension in the body, located and named them. Normalizing and inclusion matters in that process. Looking at our defense patterns can invite us into inner polarities showing up in self critical voices ('you should get rid of those tensions, you have worked on it for so long, they shouldn't be there') or denying voices ('I don't have any tensions – I am above that' or 'I can't feel anything, something is wrong with me') - one-down or one-up styles.

What supports us in looking at ourselves from a neutral observing self position and to just name what is there?

¹⁹ I have brought my knowledge about hypo-response into the SCT community for the last 6 years - since 2006. In that process I encountered the challenge of what to call it. Hypo-response is a technical language, relevant in a body-psychotherapeutic approach, but not useful in a systemic approach. We – 2 SCT leaders and I - experimented with different words: Low energy, withdrawal, apathy. And ended with 'low energy' as the one most used. This process trained me in bringing the concept of hypo-response into contexts that are not familiar with the concept - in a way that doesn't make it a difference that is too big to take in. The words matter a whole lot in that process.

Factual language is supportive – and so is sharing the phenomenon with others. Just naming the sensations as they show up in the moment – not explaining or trying to understand or fix them. And making it explicit that there are subgroups in the room sharing different versions of tension – a subgroup with tense shoulders, another one with tension in the back etc. If we can share an experience with others, it is no longer just about me. The phenomenon of tension is lifted from being just a personal challenge into a collective reality.

Normalizing and joining subgroups come before modifying the tension. If you start the process of modifying a defense pattern before you are anchored in a neutral observing self position and a member role in the outer context, there is some risk that the defense modification will become invested in the dance between one-up and one-down roles. For example: 'Let's do this so I can get rid of my tension = so I can become 'right' or = so I can be accepted by the trainer'.

The process of modifying tension is a negotiation with a pattern that is holding something for us. You can invite letting go – which is what happens with the words: 'allow yourself to drop into your chair, into contact with the ground. Sense your feet and your sitting bones, drop into them'. And then you observe what the body is doing. Maybe some of your tensions are negotiable and others aren't. Or some tensions are partially negotiable. The challenge again is to just observe this as it is, not make it right or wrong. If a tension isn't negotiable there is probably a good reason for it. Maybe the method you are using isn't functional for that part of your body – maybe another method would have a different impact.²⁰ The method used in the presentation is adapted to that specific situation. The goal is to get over the boundary and into the conference with more embodied presence – it is not to awaken material held in defense patterns.

Maybe the tension is holding on because it is compensating for other parts of your body that are in low energy states – and together these 2 strategies are holding something that isn't ready to surface? Maybe the tension becomes negotiable if you build up energy in the low energized parts first?

Tension and low energy/giving up work together in holding our defensive positions. When tension is in the foreground we can choose to track where we are not present, where we are withdrawing into low energy. When low energy is in the foreground, we can choose to track where we are holding on. To do this brings awareness to the complexity and inner system dynamic of defensive positions. A one-up position is not only held by the tensions that are visible in our posture – it is held by a combination of many tense muscles and some given up ones. And vice versa - a one-down position is held by a combination of many given up muscles and some tense ones. That is the hypothesis based on experience, that I am working from when I explore defensive roles bodily, both in myself and with others.

6. Tracking signs of low energy/giving up (hypo-response) in the body as a habitual solution to natural arousal and emotions aroused by a new context – a conference.

Now there is another way, that is less frequently addressed. We also leave parts of ourselves behind by going into low energy states, by going flaccid in parts of the body, by going distant, by losing energy. It's a very different strategy from going tense. They serve the same purpose: reducing sensation of parts of ourselves.

Right now I ask you to do the more unusual thing, which is to ask yourselves which parts of your body haven't quite arrived? Which parts of your body are not quite filled out? Which parts of your body have lower energy than other parts? A way to make it easier is to compare.

I have more energy on my outside and a little less in my inside muscles.

Some of you may track more energy on the backside and not so much on the front, or vice versa.

Or more energy up in the body and not so present down.

See if you can find your curiosity to track that.

Also notice that this is a different process. For many of us it might be a little more intimate or a little more shy or introverted to actually track what is missing. Tension has energy, has over-energy. What I'm talking about now are the under-energized parts of us. They are there, please normalize it, we all have them. They solve something for us.

How many of you joined me in that there is less energy on the inside than on the outside? How many are in that club? Inside muscles. Okay. So some of us are in that subgroup.

Who of you discovered less energy around your stomach or front side? Some are there.

Who discovered less energy in how you support yourself in your back? Some will be there.

And please include other parts if you tracked other parts.

²⁰ Modifying tension can be done in many ways. The principles I use in my work are either to invite letting go, or to give resistance to the tense muscles so they can use the held back energy in active pushing, which typically brings release. Stretching tense muscles can also bring release.

Modifying low energy bodily as a way of negotiating the habitual defensive solutions.

*Now what can we do about those parts of us. They need something different.
It doesn't work for those parts of us to let go.
We don't optimize presence in low energized areas by releasing tension.*

*So what I'm inviting you to do now is a gentle way of building up energy. In respect of time we're not able to do it in all the areas of the body, so I have chosen three places to work with.
The first one is your core.
What I ask you to do, is to do a cross-movement, where your right shoulder goes toward your left hip. This causes you to rotate your lumbar spine. You go there and then you do the opposite, you go there. See if you can just find that cross movement. Start sensing that you rotate your spine. Rotation is happening there. If it's easier for you to get it that way, you can lift your knee. Now we did the movement in a normal size, what I ask you to do now is to do it smaller. I ask you to experiment with getting down to doing this smaller. And even smaller. So you get down to a point where you can listen to really small movements. You may even go all the way down to almost just thinking the movement. But still do it. Check out what that does in your center area.²¹*

*Now I ask you to do a different thing.
I ask you to put your fingertips to each other. Do it in a way where your shoulders can relax. And then very gently push your fingertips into each other. Do it in a way where it's not hard work, where you can breathe while you do it...and you can shift between doing the push, letting go of it. Find your own rhythm. The part of your body that objectively gets activated by this is the whole front side of your body. Which means that something gathers on the front side when you do this.
Some of you may like to do it with a little more physical strength in it. My reason for choosing to guide you into the very small dosage, is that that's a way to include those parts of us that give up, that go distant. If you want to include them, do something small.
Please allow yourself to have your preferences. Maybe for some of you, you like the centering one best, and this one doesn't work, then let it go. Or vice versa.*

*I'll give you a third one, which involves the support muscles in your back, which is to just gently move your elbows backwards. Can your elbows find the back of the chair? I don't know if that's possible in these chairs. If not, just do the movement. And again: find the very gentle version. So it's not hard work, it's doing it in a way where you can breathe. But find your version of bringing energy into your back. Check out what that feels like. With that also allow your preferences.
For some of you it may be a relief to activate the back instead of the front side.
Where for others it may bring some sort of relief to get your front side gathered, where the backside does not matter in the same way.*

I invite the reader to take a moment to sense what reading this guiding did to you, before you move on. Do you notice any difference in your response to this guiding compared to the one that focused on tension?

The active components in the guiding are the same ones as with tension: Tracking and naming. Normalizing and sharing in subgroups. Choosing to modify the defense bodily – this time by building up energy in low energized areas. Selecting what works individually.

One aspect was more in the foreground this time: the dosing principle. (Brantbjerg, 2007, 2008 and 2012). I kept inviting the participants to experiment with different dosages in doing the exercises – how big or small you do the movements. And I presented the possible option of trying out very small movements. I also suggested choice – you can let go of one exercise and keep another.

If you want to include low energized parts of the body it matters how you do it.

If you just do a bodily activity and don't pay attention to how you dose it, you can easily step into inner polarization instead of modifying low energy. You unconsciously jump over into the part of you that has more energy and that has a project of getting the low energized part involved. If you do the muscle activation from that position, your tense or more filled out parts dominate the low energized parts – and most likely you will do the exercise or movement in a way that either doesn't reach the low energized parts or that brings more energy into them than they can contain. This will typically lead to the low energized parts going back into giving up – maybe a little more – after the activity, based on the experience of once more having ended up in a one-down position of not being listened to and not speaking up to be heard.

²¹ The instructions here are training the possibility of 'dosing' low in the activation of the psoas muscle. It opens up an individual choice of what level of dosage works best for the individual.

To listen to and acknowledge low energized parts you need to slow down. In my experience that process challenges our self image in a different way than working with tension does. Low energy typically has low status both inside ourselves and in outer contexts. Giving up and losing yourself are predominant mechanisms in one-down roles, which connect to low status in a social hierarchy.

To normalize and include that giving up, going into low energy is a normal defense mechanism parallel to tension is a challenging process. Hypo-response is actually a powerful mechanism – we can literally exclude parts of ourselves fully or partially from our awareness by going into low energy. Normalizing it takes, in my experience, time and repetition. The parts of us that are used to judge, push, or one-up the low energized parts, need training in slowing down, widening, letting go, including a difference, etc. The low energy parts in us, that are accustomed to not being heard or to being invested in one-down roles, need training to take their membership by becoming active in finding the precise dosages that will bring them into awareness in a realistic way. They need training in speaking up for themselves, so they can make themselves heard.

7. What difference does it make if we modify both tension and low energy?
Regulation of hyper- and hypo-arousal – and of habitual one-up or one-down roles.

*Now we did two very different processes with the body.
The first one was about releasing tension, the second one was about building up energy.
What I ask you to do now is to notice, all in all, what did that do? What is different now than before we did those two things? What is different in your perception of yourself, and what is different when you orient to the room?*

*And again this is where I have all my curiosity about what is going on in you.
The source of information I can express is the shift that happened in me.
I notice in myself that when I include both of these parts, when I don't settle with just releasing my tension, but I also include this subtle process of normalizing and paying attention to the parts of me that have the lowest energy - when I do that, it's way easier for me to not step into my habitual roles. It's like the air goes out of them. For example right now in this moment I'm no longer scared of standing here. My arousal level went way down with the work we just did. And with that it becomes much easier to not go into either 'oh my god I'm not doing this good enough' or 'I'm going to show you!'*

I can go both ways, I have both inside of me. When I include this quite fundamental polarity inside of me, that I both have parts that go tense and I also have parts in me that give up.... And together those patterns carry parts of me that I don't bring in openly... When I can normalize that and do simple exercises to modify it, then I get a freer choice.

Right now in this moment I feel a freer choice in how I am in contact with you.

What happens if both tension and low energy are modified in a situation that holds a certain level of stress?

From being present in the room during the presentation my interpretation is that both ends of the autonomic nervous system got regulated enough to optimize the safety level in the group. When becoming aware of the body and releasing tension a number of people yawned. Yawning is a sign of regulation of hyper-arousal; you yawn when you feel safe enough to let go, to not be on guard. My sense was that some of the hyper-arousal naturally triggered by arriving in a new room, a new context with 350 people, settled – people relaxed more – but not fully.

When doing the guiding into micro activations around the core there was a moment, where I felt a significant shift in the room. My experience was that the whole group at that point settled in a deeper way. When you address low energy openly and invite modification of it, you 'repair holes in the container'. Low energized parts of the body hold patterns of losing ourselves without noticing, being vague in our boundaries, having insufficient containment of our emotions or losing contact with our emotions (Brantbjerg & Stepath, 2007). Addressing those patterns optimizes safety in a different way than releasing tension does. If I notice and own where in my body I am losing parts of myself and if I can do small bodily activations that make a difference for those parts – it empowers me. It brings me into membership in my own inner context and also in the outer context in a fuller way, which regulates arousal states differently. I am less likely to be unconsciously sabotaged by the way my hidden low energy strategies 'cooperate' with my tensions.

When low energy isn't openly included in a guiding of getting present in a context, it heightens the risk that the modification of tension that is done won't last. You arrive, you settle in your chair, you relax more, your hyper-arousal settles – and then after a while you notice that your shoulders have lifted again, or you are still tense in your back. My experience is that many people recognize that version. My experience with including modification of both tension and low energy in a guiding – in simple ways – is that it regulates the arousal in the individual or the group in a deeper and more lasting way.

The autonomic nervous system has 2 branches – sympathetic and parasympathetic. According to Stephen Porges (2011, p. 54-55) the parasympathetic branch holds 2 different reactions: one is a deep collapse which is a survival reaction called hypo-arousal.²² The other is the state where we can rest, digest, sleep, process, restore, repair, make love – or said in Porges' language – be in social engagement. Arousal regulation happens by coming back into social engagement after having been in high arousal, either hyper- or hypo-arousal or both. This parallels attachment theory, which describes how regulation of both fear and any other arousal state and emotion can be mutually regulated in contact with an attachment figure, or by yourself as an adult, if you have sufficient selfregulatory capacity to relate to the arousal or emotion you are experiencing.

Hyper- and hypo-arousal aren't the same as hyper- and hypo-response. Arousal states are released from the autonomic nervous system and they regulate survival. Hyper-, hypo- and balanced response are defensive or functional mechanisms held in the muscles and connective tissue, regulating our access to psychomotor skills and emotions. Said in a different language: Muscle response patterns hold our personality patterns, both the defensive ones and the parts of us that are naturally filled out in our impulses and emotions. Experience shows that bringing more of us into balanced response in the muscles and connective tissue – through modifying both hyper- and hypo-response – increases our capacity to regulate arousal – or more precisely: arousal regulation starts happening by itself. (Brantbjerg, 2012)

When we modified low energy in the presentation – by building up energy in muscles and connective tissue through small activations – an arousal regulation happened. That is my hypothesis based on what happened in me – and based on how I perceived the group. When tension (hyper-response) was modified people yawned – a sign of regulation of hyper-arousal. When low energy (hypo-response) was modified – my experience was that something settled – as if a bottom under the group was created or strengthened. Which branch of the nervous system got regulated then? My hypothesis is that hypo-arousal got regulated. Or, maybe more precisely: By bringing energy into low energized muscles a boundary was established between hypo-response (low energy) and hypo-arousal. That means that we became more present in the here and now – and we lowered the risk of being pulled into potential underlying hypo-arousal.

Many people (including me) have underlying hypo-arousal that never got regulated and integrated after high stress or trauma. We typically manage it through dissociation, through separating it from our conscious awareness. It is still there, and it can still be triggered. It becomes an underlying threat of losing ourselves in a serious way – and it easily triggers us into hyper-arousal to compensate for or deny the underlying collapse.

If you train yourself in modifying your hypo-responsive muscles, you slowly build a bodily container that can tolerate the knowledge and experience of hypo-arousal, without being pulled into the collapse. Establishing that boundary optimizes safety in a very different way than regulating hyper-arousal does. It establishes a bodily context where regulation of hypo-arousal starts happening by itself.

The healing of trauma or high stress patterns benefits from training skills that address regulation of both hyper- and hypo-arousal and the swings between them. In the trauma therapeutic approach I teach, training modification of tension and low energy (hyper- and hypo-response) is a key ingredient that makes it possible to establish a good enough access to 'social engagement' both in individuals, dyads and groups. Then, arousal regulation can start happening by itself – and we can get into an inner state where we can access our emotions, feeling what things do to us. (Brantbjerg & Stepath, 2007)

²² 'The most phylogenetically primitive component, the immobilization system, is dependent on the unmyelinated vagus, which is shared with most vertebrates' says Porges (2011, p. 55). In this quote Porges uses the words 'immobilization system' – in other writings and presentations, he uses the word 'hypoarousal'. Ruth Lanius is using the word hypoarousal (Lanius, 2003 and 2006) My choice is to use the word hypoarousal to name the survivalreaction, that holds withdrawal, immobilization, collapse and dissociation.

In the presentation we went part of the way. Modifying both tension and low energy provided a more embodied and with that safer ground for each of us to orient into the group from. The fact that we did the defense modifications together probably heightened the impact – through mutual resonance. That is what it felt like for me, when 350 people at the same time each did their own version of the micro movements. It felt like the whole group landed more, that the collective risk of swinging between hyper- and hypo-arousal diminished, and the atmosphere in the room felt safer. I had never done this kind of guiding with a group of that size before, and I still feel moved when I think of it.

If we had had more time, an option would have been to invite in the emotions that emerged in the arrival process. When arousal is well enough regulated, when we are present in a well enough embodied way, when we enter social engagement – emotions can emerge. There is space for them to be felt, named and shared. The time frame of my presentation didn't leave time for the whole group to do that piece together, but I trust that the ground was established for it to happen in smaller contexts.

If we don't notice and maybe modify our bodily defenses (and/or verbal defenses) and we are in heightened arousal triggered by for example preparing a presentation or arriving at a conference, we will cope in our habitual ways. This will typically be in our one-up or one-down styles, as I described both in the preparation process and in the presentation. One-up and one-down positions are held in the body and in the mind by specific combinations of tension and low energy, and by specific verbal language. And they are triggered and induced by outer contexts.

Knowing that we can choose to track our tensions and low energy areas and either just include them or modify them gives us a freer choice in relationship to our habitual patterns. We can notice when we get triggered, when we resolve or increase arousal by going either one-up or one-down, we can orient in the outer context to discover what triggered us, so we don't take the habitual solutions just personally – and we can negotiate between relating to ourselves and to others from either dominant/submissive positions or from more supportive-companionable relating – and with that awareness notice how we impact the context we are in differently.

8. Normalizing and integrating both tension and low energy as defensive strategies and seeing how they cooperate to keep us in stuck roles. Stop the tendency for them to polarize to each other. And notice how that impacts presence inwardly and outwardly.

So when I prepared this presentation, I realized I had a lot of curiosity about what would happen in a conference like this, if we started there.

And also what would happen if we remember to now and then slow down enough to track these responses in these next four days.

To track these reactions because they will be there, that's for sure. There are a lot of triggers in this kind of context that will invite us into tension and into giving up.

What if we chose to slow down, track them, and do something simple.

These patterns of tension and giving up - for me they relate to something way more complex, which is the roles of dominance and submission, or the roles of going 'one up' and 'one down'. These patterns are inside of us and they are amongst us.

Now when I track both my tension and my giving up, when I include them both, I stop some of the tendency in me to allow them to polarize to each other inside of me.

That means that I will impact the context I'm in, from a different place in me.

So I have my curiosity about this conference.

I also have that curiosity about the whole world: what would happen if we took the time to include these two sides of an inner polarity, instead of letting them automatically play out against each other.

Now I managed to do this four minutes too short...!

(Applause)

So instead of pushing myself to doing more, I'll just say: it was a pleasure!

The name of the presentation and of this article is 'Polarizing or integrating differences?'. Earlier in this article I wrote about the challenge for us in relating to differences – and how easily we get triggered into dominant or submissive behaviour when doing it.

An important focus in this article has been to look at the bodily aspect of the stuck roles: tension and low energy, hyper- and hypo-response – and to see that this awareness can support regulation of arousal states – both hyper- and hypo-arousal.

Polarization happens on all levels: Inside an individual, between individuals, between stereotypical subgroups, between whole groups.²³

Working with hypo- and hyper-response (low energy and tension) – and hypo- and hyper-arousal is working with a complex inner system dynamic that holds similarities and differences within the body. Hypo-response (low energy) and hypo-arousal have a similarity given that both are strategies of giving up. And they are different given that hypo-response is a defence strategy in the muscles, to some degree possible to become aware of and choose to modify, whereas hypo-arousal is a survival reaction in the autonomic nervous system, which we cannot decide over. It happens outside of the personality's control.

Same version with hyper-response (tension) and hyper-arousal. They are similar by both holding strategies of tension and over-activation – and they are different by either being part of a defence strategy in the personality or being a survival reaction outside of the personality's control.

Within this complexity between giving up and tensing up we are challenged with how we get space for it all inside ourselves and amongst us. How do we widen our self-image, our perception of ourselves and of outer reality so we can include all the parts of ourselves and others –

- the parts that are present and filled out
- the parts that tense up and fight or control, (hyper-response)
- the parts that give up and hide in low energy, (hypo-response)
- the parts that can fight, flee, protect someone, cry for help, (hyper-arousal)
- the parts that can get us ready to die, dissociate or disintegrate (hypo-arousal)

all of which can be triggered either by a factually threatening situation or by never regulated arousal states. How do we get big enough to contain all of that – instead of letting the different parts polarize each other – inside of us and amongst us?

My experience over the last 10 years is that consciously working with the polarities held in the body has a profound impact – and also that it can be done in light ways, in small dosages. To normalize both tension and low energy makes a difference. It trains us in including the polarity – instead of automatically going dominant or submissive to each other.

For example: In my preparation process the most obvious signs of stress in my body were my tense shoulders and my tendency to handle the stress by pushing myself to perform. If I had only addressed that side of my defensive pattern I would have stayed in an inner polarizing pattern, where the tensions kept me away from the low energized part by judging them – 'they are not going to be of any help in this situation, they are weak'.

By addressing both the tension and the low energy, by observing them both neutrally, the inner polarity dissolved and it became possible to modify the defensive position in a full way including both sides of the pattern.

Another example: When I approached overwhelm, touching on old unreleased hypo-arousal, by the end of the preparation phase, my body had predominant signs of low energy (hypo-response) in the muscle system and beginning collapse in the nervous system. I was in a one-down role with an underlying hypo-arousal state awakened. I noticed how my thought patterns held on to the old perception of reality: 'I am isolated, all alone, I will be exposed to threat and be helpless to it.' This holding on based on old experience is the tense part of the one-down pattern. Part of me was actively keeping me one-down through my thinking and very likely with parts of my muscles too. (I didn't track that at that time, but I know from other times and from training groups that we - in one down roles - typically have hidden tensions that play a role in how we hold the identification with the stuck position).

I also noticed that another part of me went into hyper-arousal, polarizing to the collapse. 'I am not going to be able to handle this if I go there, I have to get out of that'.

This is an example that both shows how low energy and holding on (tension) cooperate in holding a stuck role – and also shows how the two branches of the nervous system can polarize to each other, getting us even more stuck. By acknowledging how I held myself in the one-down position by negative predictions, I chose to negotiate my thinking, getting back to the here and now, do what I know to do to acknowledge and start regulation of both hyper- and hypo-arousal signs and then orient to factual outer reality. By then I had access to psychomotor impulses of reaching out, remembering that I know people whom I can ask for support etc. These impulses were totally forgotten as long as I was in the stuck inner system dynamic between muscle responses, thought patterns and nervous system reactions.

²³ In SCT this is called isomorphy. The same phenomenon is seen on all system levels – the person, the member role, the subgroups, the group as a whole. If you notice something on one level, you can look for it on the other levels and expect to find it. (Agazarian, 2004, p. 22-24). When I started being trained in this systemic thinking I realized that I was already working systemically on at least one level: the body – through working with the complexity of hypo- and hyper- patterns.

The possibilities in how we can be stuck in the inner complex system are endless. Hyper- and hypo-response patterns can polarize to each other, sabotage each other, or they can just cooperate in holding a pattern. Hyper- and hypo-arousal can polarize to each other, trigger each other or just be foreground, background to each other. And muscle response patterns can polarize to arousal states.

An example: Getting triggered into hypo-arousal ²⁴, like I experienced in the previous example, can be 'solved' in many ways. One of them is that the personality including our self-image defends itself against the collapse by going into a lot of tension (hyper-response) in the muscles. We can literally keep ourselves out of dropping into collapse or recognizing that it exists in us that way, but it is hard work. And it is a strong inner polarization. ²⁵

When one part of us polarizes to another part it happens out of feeling threatened by a difference that feels too big. Like in the above example: If collapse is not an integrated part of what your self image includes in who you are, you will feel threatened in your personality that holds your self image when collapse emerges in you. And polarizing to it will be one way to exclude it.

This kind of polarizing dynamic can happen on all system levels – inside an individual, amongst subgroups and between whole groups.

Training myself and others in getting to know, acknowledge and include all the parts that participate in the complex system dynamic is my response to what we can do to get access to freer choices, to get out of the automatic polarizations inside of us and amongst us. Include tension and low energy as equally interesting and valuable voices. Include hypo-arousal and hyper-arousal alongside each other as equally powerful survival strategies. To do this brings and needs a widening of our value system, our skills and our knowledge base.

When I started working with trauma therapy in the 1990's²⁶ our focus was to develop methods that could support the client in moving from tonic immobility/freeze and into the active survival reactions flight and fight, so the natural impulses that had been frozen could be released. My own experience with this approach was that parts of my trauma patterns changed – and some of them didn't. Seen in retrospect I see that the patterns that were held in hyper-arousal and in freeze changed. The ones held in deep hypo-arousal didn't.

Since 2003 my curiosity – and also my inner necessity – has been to keep searching for theory and practical methods that can touch and move my own and others' dissociative patterns – primarily the ones held in hypo-arousal.

Hypo-arousal is addressed more clearly today in the field of trauma research and method development – and a clearer differentiation between freeze and hypo-arousal is being clarified.²⁷ Stephen Porges (2011), Ruth Lanius (2003 and 2006), Bruce Perry (1995) and Flemming Kæreby (2008 and 2010) are examples of researchers and therapists who all include the differences and interaction between hyper- and hypoarousal in their understanding of trauma reactions. They have been important inspirational sources for me theoretically. ²⁸

²⁴ Unregulated hypo-arousal can stay in us after a traumatic event where we were close to dying or we went into deep collapse or a given up version of disintegration. These experiences very often don't get integrated after the trauma – they challenge caregivers and careseekers as well – who are most often more focused on getting the traumatized person back into life than focused on acknowledging and including what we experienced in the hypo-arousal state. This leaves many of us with unintegrated hypo-arousal states, typically kept in degrees of dissociation, that can be triggered by specific triggers.

²⁵ You find other examples of the complexity between nervous system responses and muscle response patterns in Brantbjerg, 2012

²⁶ I was trained by Peter Levine in the early 1990s together with the Bodydynamic trainergroup in Denmark. And I was active in co-developing Bodydynamic Shocktrauma therapy from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Since 2003 I have worked on developing my own version of trauma therapy – together with 2 co-trainers, Steen Jørgensen and Kolbjørn Vårdal. A key element in my approach is to differentiate how to work with freeze and how to work with hypo-arousal – and to develop methods that can reach into hypo-arousal. The concept of 'dosing' is central in the method.

²⁷ In freeze both the sympathetic and the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system are active. Immobilization covers a hyper-arousal ready to be released when immobilization loosens. In Peter Levine's words: Speeder and brake are activated at the same time (Kæreby, 2010). In hypo-arousal the heart rate drops to 30 per minute – the body literally prepares itself for dying. (Kæreby, 2010) Bessel Van der Kolk (2007) calls the frozen state 'secondary dissociation' and the collapsed state 'primary dissociation'. These are 2 different states to heal and come back to normality from. In my experience different therapeutic methods are needed to reach into them.

²⁸ Perry and Lanius both address a gender issue in trauma reactions. They point to that hypo-arousal is more predominant in trauma reactions in women (Lanius, 2003) – and girls (Perry, 1995) – and that it is more easily overlooked than the more actively disturbing hyper-arousal patterns. (Perry, 1995). The primary research that lay behind acknowledging PTSD as a psychiatric diagnosis in 1980 (Van der Kolk, 2000; Herman, 1992) was done with combat veterans – adult males. (Perry, 1995, p. 273). All in all this points to an imbalance where the traumafield in the 1900s dealt mostly with understanding and developing methods to release hyperarousal and freeze.

The phenomena we put words to and include in models and theory get acknowledgement. They exist in a different way than they do when only represented as individual experiences that don't fit the cognitive map. Experiences can be shared, normalized and described neutrally when we include them in our knowledge base. For me this is why it matters to present a conceptual map that includes both sides of the polarity, hyper- and hypo-aspects – in the personality patterns, held by muscles and thought patterns - and in the ANS.

Doing a presentation to support us in arriving at a conference can hold both poles, without going too deep – including both the tense parts and the given up parts, bringing more of us into filled out presence – and with that arousal regulation in both ends of the autonomic nervous system can happen. For me this opens up hope. Hope for myself and others that the different parts of us can live inside the same body with acceptance of each other – and with that provide us with freer choices of how to take up membership in outer contexts.

Hope for the groups I am part of either as participant or trainer that we can choose to give equal attention and acknowledgement to information being held in either tense or low energized styles or subgroups – and with that get access to more information about what is going on in the group. And hope for bigger contexts if those of us who have this knowledge choose to bring it with us into groups, organizations, societies through finding small enough ways to get the information across the boundary.²⁹ Knowledge especially about hypo-response and hypo-arousal is challenging to bring in.

As described earlier it is relatively new that hypo-arousal gets integrated into trauma and stress research and into psychotherapy approaches. There is still a long way to go for it to be known and integrated into the theories and methods relating to stress and trauma that were developed earlier. The same challenge goes for hypo-response or low energy in personality patterns. The phenomenon is experienced and dealt with practically by practitioners, psychotherapists, physiotherapists etc. In that sense it is already included and I think, we all know it from inside.³⁰ And still, many models, theories and methods don't include it as an integrated and equally valued phenomenon.

My experience when bringing the concept of hypo-response in and training groups in awareness and modification of it is that it is still new, different and challenging for people. Challenging because it is way more difficult to track (how do you track what is not there?), it needs slowing down and careful listening, and it is connected to low status and going one-down. The presentation at the Cambridge conference was an example of bringing in awareness of both tension and low energy as factors that impact our presence and invite simple ways of modifying both. And noticing if it made a difference and in which ways.

My wish is that both the presentation and this article can inspire people to start experimenting with how to integrate the knowledge presented here into their life professionally and personally. Awareness of and curiosity about the dance between available resources, tension, low energy and arousal states starts in ourselves. The more of our own complexity we can hold, the more we can meet in others.

²⁹ If you bring new information into a context, you risk that the information is considered a difference that is too big. If that happens the boundaries close to the information. If you dose low and bring in your difference in small ways, the information is more likely to be taken in and eventually integrated. Less is more.

³⁰ On an experiential level I think we all know hypo-response/low energy and we know the difference between the three kinds of muscle response. Think of a handshake – a tense one (my hand feels crushed or I fight back with tension) – a low energized one (no energy meets me, and I either withdraw myself or I polarize and get angry) – or a filled out one (I experience a meeting between the two hands)

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