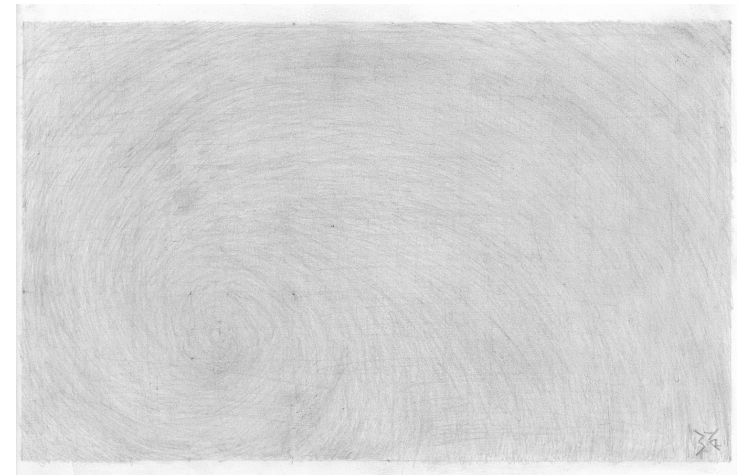


How to do things without words

A short and hopefully expanding catalogue of potentially useful ideas for systemic practitioners who want to attend to and use non-verbal communication more.



By Mark Huhnen, 2024

A short introduction

For my doctoral studies I researched how systemic practitioners can use non-verbal action or what I came to call dynamic action as opposed to symbolic action more. In a series of workshops with other practitioners to whom I am very grateful the techniques in this little booklet were created.

You should be able to print just this booklet and staple it in the middle so you can have it handy.

If you are interested in the whole research project and resulting doctoral thesis, that also builds some theory around why this might work and be useful you are of course invited to read the doctoral thesis.

Please do not understand this little booklet as a manual of how to do things (even though the title says so) but more as a collection of ideas that you might use as part of your existing practice. Or you might adapt the ideas. Or you might develop new ones. Particularly in that case but generally I would like to hear from you. You might contribute to the further growth of this project. Please email me at mark.huhnen@gmail.com

10 My house

Inspirations: Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

People sometimes describe the environment of their relationships with regards to people's location within a house like a family home or their organisations offices. (For example, when someone says that their boss stays in their office as probably metaphorically not being approachable.)

Short description:

Encourage a participant to describe and show how they experience their house, physically marking out areas in the space, that are standing in for the real space. Maybe they can choose other participants to play themselves or other people inhabiting these spaces. The participants interact. You can then 'coach' the participant who described the scenario with regards to how to handle conflicts or conflicting demands and needs foregrounding their positioning.

While this exercise will use symbolic action (likely words) the positioning and sequencing (. dynamic action) can be foregrounded.

Potential variations / extensions:

You could invite someone else to 'play' the person who had described their house to develop alternative possibilities.

You could experiment with exchanging some 'actors' in the scene or ask participants to try something different.

The ideas / techniques

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1 Show me rather than tell me

In what situations it might be useful:

In situations when someone finds it difficult to describe in words how they feel or experience someone.

Short description:

You might notice someone struggling to find (the 'right') words to describe how they 'feel' or experience something or someone. You can invite them to find a pose, movement or gesture that shows the experience.

Potential variations / extensions:

In many ways this might well be a good starting point for many other techniques described following that could therefore be seen as extensions to this basic move from intentional symbolic to intentional dynamic.

9 The neutral mask

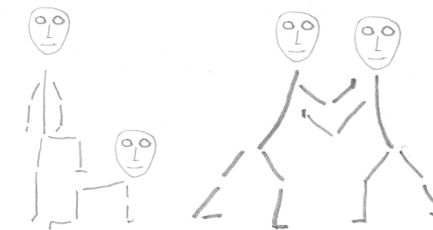
Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Often with families and groups of colleagues not only the story or narrative (White, 1989, 2007) is very 'stuck' but also the way the story is told (Pearce, 1999). With the neutral mask's focus on dynamic action other ways of telling the story become necessary and often these narratives bring out other aspects of the relational dynamics that are less often told (subjugated discourses; White, 1989, 2007).

Short description:

After either a different exercise with the neutral mask (for example "For the very first time", 9.8) or clarifying that the neutral mask cannot talk or use symbolic action, ask participants to wear the neutral mask and retell the situation. This might be very short and participants might feel that they have been prevented from telling the story and yet you and other observers might find many points to talk about. This might take the form of an observing team and might lead to replaying the scene.



Examples:

Figure 3: Dynamic action with the Neutral Mask

Potential variations / extensions:

dismissive, bored or anxious. Only curiosity makes sense. It is also important to clarify that the neutral mask cannot speak or use symbolic action.

Potential variations / extensions:

You can invite observations about when any emotion other than curiosity seems to show and what 'ideas' about curiosity or neutrality and 'habits' this might betray. There might then be joint speculation about where these ideas or habits come from (for example family scripts, Byng-Hall, 1995).

'For the very first time' might also be a good introductory exercise for other work with the neutral mask.

2 (Moving) sculpt / constellation

Inspiration: Satir (1988), Hellinger (1998, 2003)

In what situations it might be useful: Sculpt fits very well with a structural view.

There is already plenty of literature regarding sculptures and constellations (Satir, 1988; Hellinger, 1998, 2003; Duhl, Kantor & Duhl, 1973). Family or group members arrange themselves or are being arranged by one member according to how they see the relationship. Emotional proximity or distance translates into spatial proximity and distance. This sculpt or constellation can then be manipulated.

Potential variations / extensions:

Potential variations are to have other people or even objects as placeholders for members of the system.

Sculpts could be extended into moving sculptures. Participants could be asked to either trace in movement how (they imagine) they got into this sculpt or what movements they would do to get into a different sculpt.

3 The space between

Inspiration: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not “coordinating” / communicating with each other well or where it is useful to raise awareness of each other’s organisation in space.

Short description:

This works well in two steps:

- 1) With an object – a good object is a stick, not too long, not too short, and not too heavy – held between the two participants dominant hands. Ask participants to explore the movements that they can do individually and together without “dropping” the stick.
- 2) Remove the object and ask participants to do the same, just imagining the object.

Example:



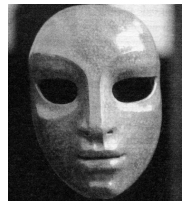
Picture 1: The object between (in html document also available as video clip)

8 For the very first time

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Where it seems useful to find a “state” of curiosity (might also be very useful in training). Or in preparation for remembering the first time of something (the first time a couple met, the first day in a new job). It can be very useful as an introduction to focus on dynamic action and work with the Neutral Mask.



Picture 4: The Neutral Mask

Short description:



Figure 2: Waking up for the very first time with the Neutral Mask

You describe a small island, beach, and a warm ocean over which the sun rises. Everything is calm and comfortable. Clarify that the neutral mask cannot talk or use symbolic action and that there is no need to ‘add’ anything to the scenario,

just being with the island, sea and sun rise is enough. Participants put on a neutral mask and imagine that they are awakening for the very first time. It is worth spending a little more time on exploring what waking up for the very first time would mean. There is no need to be afraid,

Potential variations / extensions:

You can talk about the inherent metaphor: “What if we replace ‘ball’ with ‘message’ or ‘act of communication’?”

Potential variations / extensions:

You can encourage participants to use other parts of the body to “hold” the object with.

You can let more than 2 participants explore this together.

You can bring it back into symbolic action: “What was that like?” “Are there or were there times in your life / work together where it was like this?”

You can encourage noticing what is still possible despite this restraint.

This technique might further lead into “the fixed point” (9.4) and / or “Stuck/Unstuck” (9.5).

4 The fixed point

Inspiration: Aikido

In what situations it might be useful:

When people describe themselves as being stuck or held back.

Short description:

Enquire more into the metaphor, keeping it on a physical level: where in your body would you locate the point where you are fixed or held back? Fix this point or part of the body and ask the person to explore how much movement is still possible. Can they relax that point? Or the parts around it? Can they breathe 'into' that point?

Example:



Picture 2: The fixed point (in html document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

This technique might further lead into "Stuck / unstuck" (9.5).

7 Group juggling

Inspirations: Sheryl Malcolm (Sheryl and I worked together using theatre and play in schools and developed this.), Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not "coordinating" / communicating with each other well. It also offers great metaphors for communication. It is also good as ice-breaker and name learning exercise. It might open up very entrenched patterns.

Short description:

With a group of people start passing a juggling ball to each other in a repeatable pattern that includes everybody once. With a group that does not know each other very well you can ask people to say their own name when receiving a ball before (staying in the same pattern) the person throwing the ball calls the receiver's name.

At some point go to silent mode (no calling names) and introduce more balls.



Figure 1: Group juggling

At some point ask to break the pattern.

Several balls will be in the air at the same time. You might facilitate with questions like "What makes for a successful passing of the ball?" "Is throwing more important or receiving?" "How do you know the other person is ready to receive the ball?"

You can afterwards go back to symbolic action and explore with the person and their family and group the difference.

5 Stuck / unstuck

Inspiration: Aikido

In what situations it might be useful:

When people feel an inevitability or feel stuck or feel held back or feel attacked

Short description:

You probably would first set this up carefully. "Show me rather than tell me" (9.1) might help with that. Or you could explore the metaphor, stretching it: "Where in your body do you feel held. Another participant or group or family member could hold the person as they have described and the person can then explore what options or movements are still available.

It seems less important to find an actual solution and more important that the idea of a solution, trying to do things differently is entertained.

Example:



Picture 3: Stuck/unstuck (in html document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

There might sometimes be good reasons (other people) why a person might feel further restricted. In one case (described earlier in the book) the person wanted to protect others “behind” them. You can add people to the constellation and ask the person to further explore what is possible.

A possible good extension might be to move towards solution focussed techniques and explore further, for example: “if the relationship between you and the other person was more like how you experienced it in this exercise, what things would become possible?”

6 Say it / do it again

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020), Playback theatre

In what situations it might be useful:

When you get a sense that people have moved themselves physically or metaphorically into a difficult position or view of themselves.

Short description:

Ask a person to do or say something again but in a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice.

Example:

A person might find themselves in an unhelpful position or with a limiting sense of self, where it is difficult for them to fully or proudly own an achievement. You might get a feeling that they are dismissing their own achievement from their dynamic action. You could ask them to say it louder, standing on a chair, chest pushed forward.

Potential variations / extensions:

Another group / family member can try to say or do the same thing again but also with a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice. This way many possibilities are created.