

Rolf Movement Faculty Perspectives

The Role of Imagination in Structural Integration

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Structural integration (SI) is founded on the notion that posture can change, and that the shape of the body in gravity can make a lasting change. But what shapes our physical body? What shapes our perceptive body? These questions in turn lead us to ask, what is the relationship of imagination to perceptive shape and body shape? Imagination is an important part of SI and turns out to play a key role in our best explanation for why SI works.

Imagination is closely related to perception. Our brain assembles bits of sensation into an experience, which we call a perception. Putting bits of sensory material together into a meaningful experience in the brain is also imagination. At the sensory cortex level, perception of a sensation is the same as imagining the sensation.

Our experience of the world is, effectively, an assembled representation of the world. We build a perception of the world – the world we inhabit is the one we build. As we build the shape of our perceived world, our body shape develops correspondingly.¹ Depending on how we imagine our world, and what we imagine as our body, our body shape expresses the result of that internal process.

The structure of our body and the structure of our perceptual processes are not normally plastic – they are not meant to change casually. Our welfare depends on reliability and consistency of perception, what Gibson calls invariant perception.² However, under some circumstances our perceptive possibilities can change. If our perceptive possibilities open to something new, and if something new is integrated into coordination, we have changed perceptive structure. Shifts in perceptive and coordinative structure in turn change body shape. SI is a means to do this.

Imagination is a skill.³ Skill with imagination develops through a learning process. An example of this learning process is embedded in SI. We learn to differentiate the map of body and peri-personal space⁴ – something we teach clients and students with fascia-oriented touch, and with movement, visual cues, and our own embodiment.

It should be acknowledged that imagination can be a confusing word. One might ask, “Isn’t imagination just inventing anything in the mind?” Does “pretending” belong in the serious work of SI? Is talk about imagination a form of induction or, worse,

an induction into a practitioner’s pet cosmology or belief system? What specific kind of imagination is being referred to in the context of movement and SI?

To answer this question, it helps to talk about posture and coordination as a response of the body’s movement system. “Movement brain” is a term that conveniently denotes the system processes of the body that guide our ability to move.⁵ This system process doesn’t depend on thinking about it. (In neuroscience terms “movement brain” or “movement system” is roughly equivalent to “body schema.”) When a body expresses ease of posture, effective response to demand, when we see examples of successful movement, it is because the body movement system, the movement brain, is functioning well, functioning congruently and aligned to the welfare of the person.

Some forms of imagination “speak to” the movement brain (body schema) more than others. “Speak to” here means facilitate useful information flow to liberate movement from whatever thoughts, habits or inhibitions might be getting in the way, as well as inspire the movement brain to find new answers to meeting demand.

What forms of imagination speak to the movement brain? Helpful forms of imagination build a sense of location, differentiation of body map, and differentiation of the space around the body. For example, imagining a sense of weight in the body speaks strongly to the movement brain because a sense of weight is an essential part of the calculus for motor control. Feeling the location of a bony articulation is a refreshing of the body map; the map becomes clearer and more differentiated.