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## “Too many mind”

Joanna Michopoulou

### Abstract

Stories from everyday life move, and provide inspiration to, systemic practitioners. At the same time, they can teach us important lessons about complex relational movements and improvised coordinations. If surprises don't surprise us and tightrope-walking in interactions doesn't scare us, are we prepared to 'live on the edge', in the present moment - a moment when we have to rely on our spontaneous, expressive-responsive living, bodily activities? In this paper, I offer some reflections from my experience in martial arts which has taught me much about the relationship between thinking and doing; about preparing to act, and acting in the moment. I discuss how, in sparring (a form of mock fighting with a partner, where people make the motions of attack and defence for training purposes), knowing and acting become one in the moment of interaction with the sparring partner. Spontaneous, unreflective knowing just happens. No inner dichotomies are possible. Due to its demanding and fast nature, sparring provides opportunities to notice how responses get slower and coordination gets ruined when a trained thinking and reflexive mind gets in the way of our embodied awareness in the moments of living interaction. And in our systemic practice, theoretical frameworks and constant "how-to" considerations can alienate us from the people in front of us, from the livingness of our moments together. But what is more beautiful and ethical than two people being intimately open to becoming directly known to each other, as they emerge through and as part of their interrelating?

### περίληψη (Greek)

Ιστορίες βγαλμένες μέσα από εμπειρίες της καθημερινότητας εμπνέουν τους συστημικούς θεραπευτές και μας δίνουν σπουδαία μαθήματα για τους σύνθετους τρόπους με τους οποίους κινούμαστε μέσα στις σχέσεις μας και για τον αυτοσχεδιασμό ως κομμάτι της διαδικασίας συντονισμού μας με τον άλλο άνθρωπο. Αν οι εκπλήξεις δεν μας εκπλήσσουν και η ισορροπία στο τεταμένο σχοινί της αλληλεπίδρασης δεν μας τρομάζει, είμαστε άραγε έτοιμοι να σταθούμε στην «κόψη του ξυραφιού», στο τώρα; Το λεπτό εκείνο σημείο όπου θα πρέπει να αφευθούμε στην αυθόρμητη και ζωντανή εκφραστικότητα – απαντητικότητα που πηγαία βγαίνει μέσα από τη σύνδεση μας με τον άλλο άνθρωπο; Σε αυτό το άρθρο προσφέρω κάποιες σκέψεις από την εμπειρία μου με τις πολεμικές τέχνες, η οποία με έχει διδάξει πολλά για τη σχέση μεταξύ σκέψης και πράξης, μεταξύ προετοιμασίας και πραγματικής αλληλεπίδρασης. Συζητώ πώς κατά την προπόνηση της πυγμαχίας, σε ένα είδος ψεύτικης πάλης με κάποια συναθλήτρια, με σκοπό την πρακτική εξάσκηση, η απόσταση μεταξύ της σκέψης και της πράξης μηδενίζεται. Οι κινήσεις έρχονται αυθόρμητα χωρίς σκέψη. Λόγω της απαιτητικής και γρήγορης φύσης του αθλήματος, δίνονται ευκαιρίες για σημαντικές παρατηρήσεις: για παράδειγμα οι αντιδράσεις γίνονται πιο αργές και ο ρυθμός της προπόνησης αποσυντονίζεται μόλις το καλά εκπαιδευμένο σκεπτόμενο μυαλό εμπλακεί και παραγκωνίζει την γνώση που βγαίνει μέσα από την ζωντανή αλληλεπίδραση με την συναθλήτρια την στιγμή της άσκησης. Και στη δουλειά μας σαν συστημικοί θεραπευτές, τα θεωρητικά πλαίσια μέσα από τα οποία κινούμαστε και οι συνεχείς εσωτερικές διεργασίες για το πώς να πράξουμε, μπορούν να μας αποξενώσουν από τους ανθρώπους που βρίσκονται μπροστά μας και από την «ζωή» των στιγμών μας μαζί τους. Αλλά, τι μπορεί να είναι πιο όμορφο και πιο ηθικό από ανθρώπους συνδεδεμένους και ανοιχτούς για να γνωριστούν όπως είναι και όπως αναδύονται μέσα από τις στιγμές της σύνδεσης τους;

*“Please forgive... too many mind...”*

*“Too many mind?”*

*“Yes. Mind the sword, mind the people watch, mind the enemy, too many mind... No mind”*

*“No mind...”*

*“No mind”*

In this quotation from the film “The Last Samurai” (2004), Captain Nathan Algren is taken captive by Samurai and held in their village. They treat him kindly and allow him to walk around the village, observe their way of living and participate in their customs. In one particular scene, Algren has joined them while they practise martial arts fighting techniques, and he is fighting with one of the Samurai. He uses various moves and techniques to attack his opponent but each time is soundly thrashed. After being thrown to the ground again and again, the son of the Samurai Master walks over to Algren and says, “Too many mind. Mind the sword, mind the people watch, mind the enemy, too many mind”.

In our everyday interactions, we find ourselves in the centre of an indeterminate number of reflexively related context levels and we are always in more than one conversation (Pearce Associates 1999). This polyphony (Bakhtin 1981) in our minds in our moments of interaction with others can be quite confusing and disturbing sometimes, and often can be experienced as “cacophony” (Simon 2013). A well-trained, thinking and reflexive mind’s role is then to quickly get into the mode of “saving the moment”, taking responsibility to do what’s right, to consider all possibilities, to protect, to ensure and so on. There is a lot to be processed in the moment; every little detail in an interaction will be awaking a different stream of thinking as it will be reaching into a different area of our life. But, like the quotation from the Last Samurai above, an old Christian story tells us that one cannot serve two masters at the same time because for someone to be devoted to one master he or she will have to disregard the other. Of course, the terminology of master and servant comes from a specific set of stories of Christian teachings but we could understand it symbolically to mean that in the moment of action, one cannot be attending to and organised by two dominant ideas at the same time. When we are thinking *about* something, our minds will wander through many places. But acting *from within an* interaction is acting from one place, the present moment.

*“The present – the concreteness of the present – as a phenomenon to consider, as a structure, is for us an unknown planet; so we can neither hold on to it in our memory nor reconstruct it through imagination. We die without knowing what we have lived.”*

(Kundera 1993, p.129)

## My experience with martial arts

Three years ago, I came across martial arts, and in this writing I would like to share some reflections from my experiences with boxing training that I have found inspiring in relation to my response-ability from within moments of being in interaction with others.

I had never thought about starting a martial art before but it happened that my trainer in the gym had a specialisation in Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu so he introduced me to boxing. Training in boxing was fun; very technical, demanding a high level of body and mind coordination, a good focus on breathing and a heightened awareness of inner and outer sensations. It was great for fitness too, so I decided to carry on with it. Over time I found boxing training illuminating in a number of ways, not least because of the fact that it tolerates no inner dichotomies in the moment of sparring (sparring is part of regular boxing training with a training partner, where one makes the motions of boxing without landing heavy blows; it is something like mock fighting, with the aim of improving skills and fitness).

In a sparring session, there is no way one can get into the logic of having to consider and choose consciously what to do in the moment - there is a joining of inner voices and knowledges together to “serve” what intuitively feels the most important “master” at every moment of interaction. It allows absolutely zero splits between thinking, feeling and acting. In that way inner dialogue is refined, endless mind talk is paused and outer dialogue (bodily dialogue in this case) is foregrounded. The absolute necessity for heightened focus and concentration in the moment of sparring increases responsiveness to the maximum. “How to” pre-planning is useless in the moment of sparring (although preparation exercises are very hard). “...We cannot, I think, plan genuine innovative change, but we can prepare ourselves for it.” (Shotter 2010, p.136) Everything is unpredictable. Before the action, it doesn’t make sense to ask “how-to” because what exactly would “how-to” refer to? During the action, a fighter’s openness to what may come, her intense focus and full involvement in the moment of action would help generate a constant flow of spontaneous “how-to” knowings before even a “how-to” question gets consciously formed.

Sparring helped me realise *in practice* that there is no way that I can be responding both to my actively thinking mind about the situation I am in **and** to the situation I am in with everything in it. I found it is impossible to both think about the situation I am in **and** think from within the situation. Karen Barad (2007), in her book “Meeting the Universe Halfway”, talks about the impossibility of doing something and thinking about what we are doing at the same time. She is saying that we need to make a choice between two complementary situations:

“either we are doing something in which case that something is the object of our “doing” or we are thinking about what we are doing in which case the thought about what we are doing is the object of our doing and not what we are actually doing in the moment” (p.21).

I have found that my awareness of what I am connecting with and how, is very acute in the moments of sparring, because during a sparring session there is absolutely no space for separate spaces, no dualities are tolerated (mind, body, me, you). The distance between subject and object ceases to be the condition for knowledge’s possibility. Knowing and movement is one, me and you, good moves and mistakes, hitting and getting hit, exhaustion and ability, standing and falling, everything is one. Or there is no sparring session. There is no way to fake synchronisation, no way to dodge it and pretend coordination. There is no space for explanations and reflections either. They

are just not important. There is an absolute requirement to be fully immersed in the moment and this is the only way to learn, the only way to do it. To dare to be out there, present and fully visible.

### **Improvising spontaneous interactions**

In conversations or other interactions, it is often that we move in and out of our connection with the other, in and out of what is happening in that moment. Of course, many things are happening together in one moment. But we can step out *of being in sync with the other* and connect with our own thoughts or something else which pops up in our inner conversations, a feeling, a reflection, a memory, an imagination. This something maybe about the situation we are in or not. Interactions are a bit like tightrope-walking - we will be moving in and out of different contextual stories in our minds. But my interest is being captured by what Shotter (2004 p.144) calls, "...our spontaneously, expressive-responsive living, bodily activities occurring unceasingly in our relational moments." These activities do not require our thinking but our paying attention. And paying attention is not something that happens just with the mind but with our whole embodied self.

If we are sensitive to the "touches" of the moment, our taking part in it will be spontaneously fitting. Every moment of interaction is a moment for taking part (or not taking part); a "continuous" and rolling moment of action (or inaction), a moment for responding. And then, there is a next moment following, for more expressive – responsive activity, and the next and the next, and this is how improvisational dancing happens in our everyday relational activities.

"... explore the possibility of there being for us, as living beings, many more immediate and unreflective bodily ways of being related to our surroundings than the ways that have become conspicuous to us in our more cognitive reflections – ways of orienting ourselves to the others and othernesses around us that can become directly known to us within the unfolding dynamics of both our, and their, bodily movements in the course of our engaged intra-actions with them."

(Storch and Shotter 2013, p.1)

Boxing training has in a way been good practice for spontaneity. It has helped me notice when my natural, embodied sensitivity to a situation gets blocked. It has helped me become more acutely aware when I am not taking part in the expressive – responsive flow of the moment of interaction. And it has helped me practise facing the fear of consciously allowing my intuitive, unreflective knowing lead the way.

"At this point in time my intuition seems to be what I rely on the most. In re-walking my professional tracks, my intuition tells me that I shall take part first, and then sit down and think about the taking part; not sit down and think first and thereafter take part. As I am sure that my thinking is with me as I take part, I have felt comfortable following what my intuition has suggested to me"

(Andersen 1992, p.55, in Shotter 2007, p.31)

There are many examples of surrendering to our “immediate and unreflective bodily ways of relating to our surroundings” (Storch and Shotter 2013, p.1), examples of moving from order to wonder in the world of improvised performances; like conduct improvisation dance (a movement improvisation mainly explored in duets in a relaxed but constantly aware and flowing manner), jazz improvisation, snowboarding, tennis playing and many more spaces for exchange of invitations and responses that come up spontaneously, in the moment. I remember, a few years ago, my snowboarding trainer’s reaction when I was telling her: “I need to practice my turns and I need to practice my balance so that I can start going faster down the slopes”. She responded: “Just practice riding, Joanna”. Allowing myself to be lost in the moment of action (away from my rational orderly thoughts) and to wander down the slopes was the only way to do it. “An active line on a walk moving freely without a goal. A walk for a walk’s sake. The mobility agent is the point shifting its position forward” (Klee 1972, p.16)

Frank Barrett (2012) in his book “Say Yes to the Mess” talking about his experiences in jazz improvisation writes:

“Jazz musicians, by contrast, often speak of letting go of deliberation and control. They employ deliberate, conscious attention in their practice but at the moment when they are called upon to play, this conscious striving becomes an obstacle. Too much regulation and control restricts the emergence of new ideas. To get jazz right, musicians must surrender their conscious striving.” (p.61)

Barrett (2012, p.43) quotes a favourite saying of jazz trumpet legend Miles Davis: “If you’re not making a mistake, it’s a mistake.” Errors lead musicians to reach beyond their comfort zones in the very moment of doing it. Experimenting and performing happen together.

### **Losing it...**

So let us go back to my experiences from my training in boxing for a minute. The sparring session is three minutes long. For these three minutes it is what it is and nothing else. If I take a second to think *about* what is happening and let my mind take over, my responses get slower, my bodily awareness and intuitive understanding of the situation gets weaker, my coordination with my sparring partner is ruined. And this is so obvious when I watch recordings from my training sessions. In the split second my mind thinks *about* what is happening, what I see in the recording is **no longer** two people sparring but one involved in sparring and the other being lost somewhere as if she is searching for something, like a dog chasing its own tail. Connecting with what my conscious mind tells me to focus on and what the situation calls from me, are very different. Hilary Swank (2011), the main actress in the film “Million Dollar Baby” (2005) in an interview about the training she undertook for the role in this film of a young professional boxer, said:

“...the biggest thing that I learned was when you are in the ring, if you are not in the moment, it’s over. An example of that is: someone can hit me and I can think wow how did they get in, how did they hit me, but the second I am thinking that, I get hit again. And it goes the other way. If I hit someone, if I think wow! where did that come from, that was a really good hit, it’s over, I am gonna get hit, the second you are not in the moment, it’s over.”

Scrutinising and analysing everything, in a way trying to control everything we are doing, has become such a mainstream way of being. One can easily get caught in a constant need to explain one's everyday actions almost scientifically and in our society this has become equivalent to what it means to be responsible. Actions are being constantly analysed into sets of elements connected in repetitive patterns for conclusions to be produced through observation, reflection and questioning. And this is useful, it certainly is. But I believe it is so overemphasised in our lives that we are sometimes misleading ourselves, sending ourselves off to the wrong direction. I think that these beliefs and practices to do with improving our lives have become a major "prejudice" about how things should be happening.

"We can see now how an unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinise closely the particulars of a comprehensive entity and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed. Such cases are well known. Repeat a word several times, attending carefully to the motion of your tongue and lips and to the sound you make, and soon the word will sound hollow and eventually lose its meaning. By concentrating attention on his fingers, a pianist can temporarily paralyse his movement. We can make ourselves lose sight of a pattern or physiognomy by examining its several parts under sufficient magnification. Speaking more generally, the belief that, since particulars are more tangible, their knowledge offers a more true conception of things is fundamentally mistaken. ... an explicit integration cannot replace its tacit counterpart... the knowledge I have of my own body differs altogether from the knowledge of its physiology; and the rules of rhyming and prosody do not tell me what a poem told me without any knowledge of its rules"

(Polanyi 2009, p.18)

For a long time, during sparring, I kept insisting on putting my mind in charge of everything, of what my embodied self "knew", of what I was about to find out anyway in the moment of interaction. But when my embodied knowing wasn't presenting in a form that my mind would understand, or at the time that my mind demanded it to appear, I would just neglect it. When my embodied knowing couldn't be inserted in my mind's performance tables and measurement devices, when I had to wait until that embodied knowledge revealed itself and I had to be patient, I wasn't. I kept rejecting arrogantly my embodied ability to know how to go on and I kept looking somewhere out of the situation, somewhere outside the present moment of intra-action to find what I must do to respond to the situation. I kept breaking things down to concepts that my mind could absorb, I kept trying to consider things separately.

"Knowing is a matter of intra-acting. Knowing entails specific practices through which the world is differentially articulated and accounted for. In some instances, "nonhumans" (even beings without brains) emerge as partaking in the world's active engagement in practices of knowing. Knowing entails differential responsiveness and accountability as part of a network of performances. Knowing is not a bounded or closed practice but an ongoing performance of the world."

(Barad 2007, p.149)

I soon realised that I wouldn't be able to continue boxing training if I kept holding myself separate from the moment of interaction – I realised I had to get immersed in the present moment of sparring, so that I could emerge as “martial artist” in that moment. In the same way that my snowboarding teacher asked me to practice “riding”; not balance, not turns, but riding. Allowing myself to get immersed into the moments of riding, I could emerge as a snowboard rider in those moments. As Shotter (2010) writes:

“... only if we are prepared to live ‘on the edge’, that is, in the present moment, in the midst of complexity, can we find the new openings, the new possibilities we need to truly bring about innovative change. We will find it difficult, however, to understand how this might be possible... given our present modes of factual and rational expression” (p.139)

### **Mind without mind**

In Japan there is an expression that goes: *mizu no kokoro* which means “mind like still water” and *Mushin* is a term used in martial arts meaning “the mind without mind”. To achieve the state of *Mushin*, the mind must be free from conscious, active thinking and the practitioner must become one with the attacker for the technique to be effective, efficient and harmonious. *Mushin* is the state when what you observe and what you are in the moment become one. The watcher and the watched become the same; there is no separate watcher and separate watched. And I am reminded of Heraclitus' saying: “The world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into his private world.” (Kahn 1979, p.31)

In *Mushin*, when the opponent attacks, one should have a mental state that reacts to the unique situation in the moment of action instantaneously and not through a pre-determined course of action. One should not say, “I'll do this move”. Instead one must respond spontaneously. There is a saying by Zen master Takuan Soho that, “it is not the man but the sword in this man's hands that strikes”. I think the same goes with words and communication. When I speak with someone it is not I who speak but it is the words in my mouth that speak. The words never belong to the individual person. “The process of active understanding is anticipated by the speaker; he counts on it at every point, and could not continue to formulate his utterance without counting on it.” (Morson and Emerson 1990, Kindle Locations 2459-2460).

### **In our movement together, let us keep becoming directly known to each other**

I guess, what is staying with me from my training sessions in boxing, is something which I don't like to be doing. And as Tom Andersen said, “What seems to be important is to learn what I shall not do again” (Andersen 1992, p.54 in Shotter 2007, p.18). And this is the experience of being with someone, doing something together and being disconnected from what *we* are doing together; disconnected from the other person, as if it is me alone doing it, not us. And a feeling that suddenly his actions are foreign, that I am a foreigner, frozen and out of place. Whenever I notice this feeling of disconnection I invite myself back to be focused on the interaction and open to meet with the truth which will be emerging in that moment...

“when life comes to me it touches my skin, my eyes, my ears, the bulbs of my tongue, the nostrils of my nose. As I am open and sensitive to what I see, hear, feel, taste, and smell I can also notice ‘answers’ to those touches from myself, as my body, ‘from inside,’ lets me know in various ways how it thinks about what the outside touches; what should be concentrated on and what not. This state of being open and sensitive to the touches from the ‘outside life’ and at the same time being open and sensitive to the answers from the ‘inside life’ is what I prefer to call ‘intuition’”

(Andersen 1992, p.55 in Shotter 2007, p.31)

I think we owe it to our clients. No-one is going to be hit in a therapy conversation if we are not fully immersed into the moment and lose connection, like one can be hit in boxing. Certainly, the therapist is not going to be hit (in boxing no-one is excluded from getting hit). But hits are not only physical. There can be emotional hits if a therapist is there but not *with* the other, not open to being touched and changed by the other, if the therapist is standing there invulnerable and there is no reciprocity in taking risks. Our profession makes promises. From a client’s point of view, therapy is probably the profession which mostly tampers with perhaps the biggest hope a human being can have: to relate, to be understood and “seen” by the other. The risk of becoming “anaesthetised” in practice means losing sensation, responsiveness and sensitivity. To me, this risks becoming unethical. And as Barad (2007) says, “Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.” (p.393).

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## Author

**Joanna Michopoulou** is a systemic therapist in private practice based in Athens. Since 2011, when Joanna moved back to Greece after having lived in the UK for 15 years, she has been working collaboratively with individuals, couples and families and have been running personal development groups and workshops - sometimes together with colleagues from the UK - experientially sharing systemic and Social Constructionist ideas. She is currently a candidate for the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire.

Joanna Michopoulou, Platia Ag. Sofias 5, Neo Psychiko, 154 51, Athens, Greece

E-mail: [jmichopoulou@gmail.com](mailto:jmichopoulou@gmail.com)

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