

# Towards the Recovery of a Sense of Self: an IPA of Experience of Body-Oriented Psychotherapy for Schizophrenia

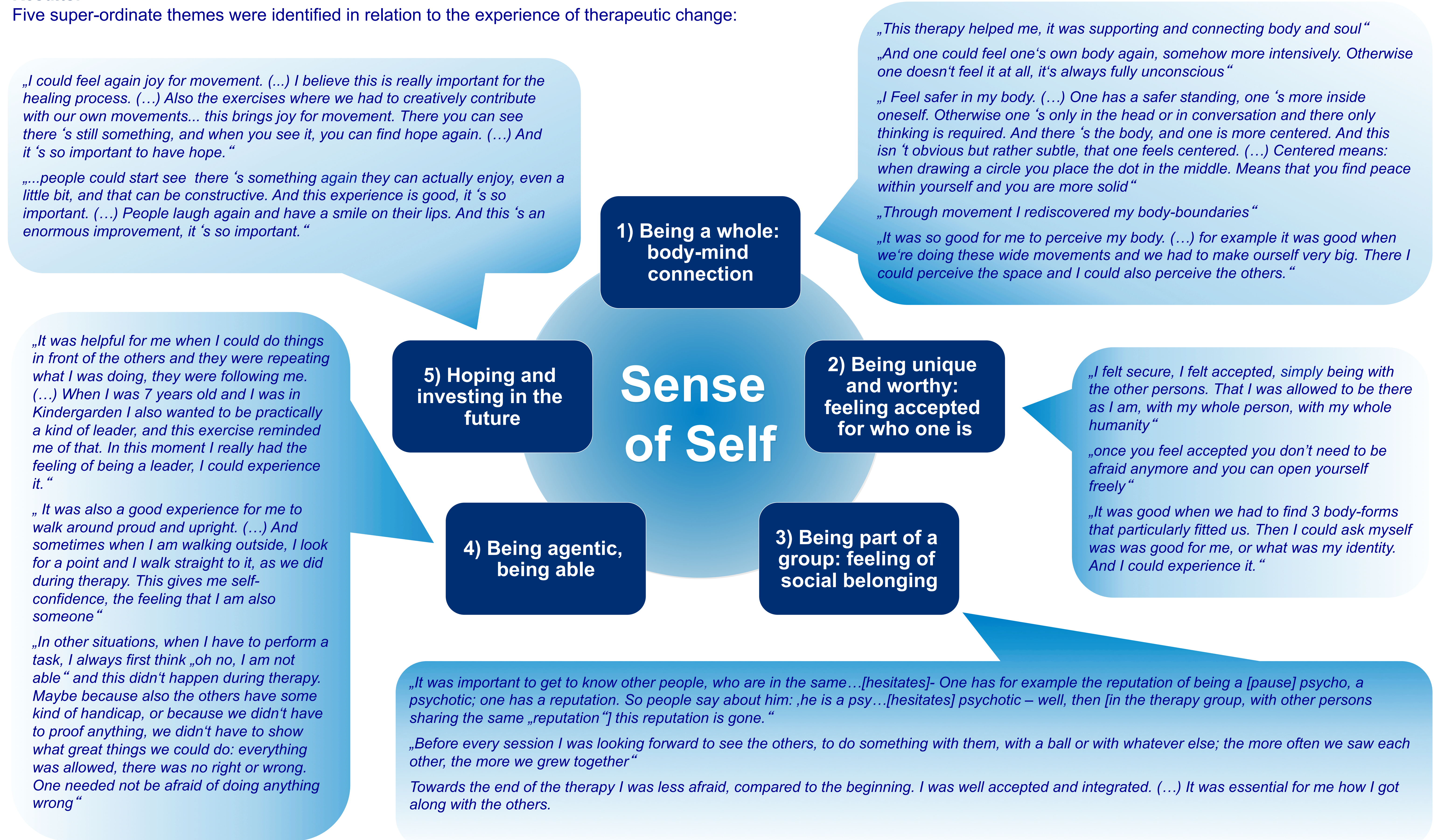
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## Background:

Phenomenological psychiatry conceptualizes schizophrenia as a disorder of the Self: more specifically, anomalous self- experience has been described as disturbed basic self-consciousness, loss of natural self-evidence and disembodiment. The minimal self, the implicit, basic and bodily level of experience lays at the core of the disorder. Consistently, specific body-oriented psychotherapy interventions for schizophrenia have been developed, addressing first and foremost the implicit and bodily level of experience. **The aim of this study is to explore participants' experience of body-oriented psychotherapy in order to shed light on the helpful factors of therapeutic change.**

## Results:

Five super-ordinate themes were identified in relation to the experience of therapeutic change:



## Discussion:

**These 5 super-ordinate themes share the underlying idea of the recovery of a sense of self at different levels.** The pre-reflective sense of being a coherent embodied subject of experience is expressed in the theme we labeled **“body-mind connection”**: participants described the experience of feeling grounded in their own body as opposed to be “just in thoughts or in the head”. The aspect of disembodiment, typical of schizophrenia, is here directly addressed and is reported by participants as one of the core dimensions where they experienced therapeutic change. Another aspect of what we called “a sense of self” is the feeling of **being a unique person worthy of recognition**. Being recognized and accepted for who one is, without judgment, seems to be of central importance for the healing process. Besides, participants experienced a sense of worthiness and started to re-discover their own personality and identity. This intersubjective dimension of acceptance and recognition is tightly related to the **feeling of social belonging and integration**. Withdrawal and disengagement are typical of schizophrenic disorder and are also related to the problem of social stigma and exclusion; in contrast, participants described the helpful experience of belonging to a group and feeling integrated: they enjoyed and valued the interaction with others and actively engaged in relationships. **Being an active subject of experience** in the interaction with the world and with others, as compared to a sense of passivity and helplessness, is another important aspect of the sense of self. Participants did not only experience themselves as worthy but also as able; they started to trust themselves as competent persons and expressed the will to actively pursue their own well-being. This experience yielded a shift from a passive attitude to an active stance towards recovery. Finally, the dimension of **hope** emerged as a core aspect in that it orients the person towards the future, opens up possibilities and constitute a basic motivation for change.

## Conclusions:

These results draw the attention to the importance of the implicit, pre-reflective and intersubjective dimension in the context of therapy for schizophrenia:

- Healing factors specifically related to a body-oriented psychotherapy approach as “mind-body connection” and “being active and agentic” highlight the importance of addressing the **embodied and implicit dimension** in therapy for schizophrenia
- Healing factors as “being recognized”, “sense of belonging” and “hope” are more related to the establishment of **open intersubjective space**, characterized by authenticity, acceptance, presence and participation. Interestingly, the fundamental role of this implicit intersubjective dimension for a treatment approach to schizophrenia seems to be a common ground shared by authors coming from different traditions (e.g. Mishara, 1995; Kimura, 1982; Stanghellini & Lysaker, 2007; Seikkula & Trimble, 2005) and we believe that this may constitute a promising direction for future research.