

RHYTHMICITY—A POWERFUL FORCE FOR EXPERIENCING UNITY AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: New research on the rhythmic aspects of human communication opens up to care practice a number of promising ways for working with children, youth and adults. This article highlights the importance of locating the mutual “pulse” of care interactions and then employing interpersonal techniques in the overt use of rhythmicity to foster a sense of togetherness and common purpose.

Introduction

Have you noticed that when people jog, dance or throw a frisbee in rhythm with each other, they seem to experience momentary bonding and a sense of unity? At these and other moments of joint rhythmic engagement, they discover an attraction for each other regardless whether there has been a previous sense of caring. In fact, it is almost impossible to dislike a person while being rhythmically in “sync.” Rhythmic interactions forge people together. Rhythmicity provides a “glue” for establishing human connections. The value and power of these pulsating interactions may offer an eye opener for the practice of care interactions of young and old, for caregivers and care receivers alike.

Rhythmicity Evidenced and Recognized Through Human History

Throughout the ages we find rhythmic interactions and the subsequent fostering of group cohesion in folklore and daily practice. Illustrations of these are rocking or singing lullabies to babies for comfort or sleep (evidenced in most cultures), or a gathering pulled together by the rhythmic beat of a drum, a dance, song, or a folk hymn. In looking at our own diverse working spheres in preschool education as well as in martial youth activities, rhythmic experiences are powerful agents for achieving quite differentiated objectives.

While rhythmicity can be a powerful force for linking people together, it can also be a vital force in the search for internal togetherness. For instance, playing rhythmically with one’s necklace or beard, humming a catchy tune, or repeatedly jiggling the coins in one’s pocket: each one of these activities is part of a search for locating predictiveness and a center of connection within oneself.

Social Sciences' Recent Discoveries of Rhythmicity as a Part of Human Communication

Rhythmicity as a potent ingredient in everyday life has long been sensed and drawn upon. Only in the past decades, however, has rhythmicity been "discovered" scientifically for its intrinsic power in human relations. In a sense this recent documentation reflected self-evident phenomena. Life itself entails a spectrum of natural rhythm like the regularity of the heartbeat or the alteration between day and night. What is old can indeed be new! A whole new branch of psychology has been established (Birdwhistle, 1970; Brazelton, Koslowski & Main, 1974; Byers, 1972; Condon, 1970; Davis, 1982; Hall, 1976; Whitehead, 1974). Studies of rhythms in kinesthetics and especially in the rhythmic pulse of human contacts have spawned original scientific concepts, enhancing the spectrum for understanding human behavior and development.

Interestingly, Paul Byers, one of the pioneers of this group of researchers, became so excited by their discoveries that he thought that they had located "the molecules of human behaviors" (Byers, 1972, p. 1). They discerned in their specialized and highly technical research, based upon electronic and pictorial measurements, that rhythmic interactions are revealed in an "unconscious undercurrent of synchronized movements" (Hall, 1976, p. 66). William Condon in turn demonstrated that there is synchronization "between the body movements of the listener and the articulatory structures of the speaker's speech" (Condon, 1975, p. 85). Their empirical research established that these "molecules of human behavior" occur even in film frames of 1/64 per second. Such startling revelations imply that our human communication is joined together by its rhythmic fit—a challenging message for all human relation efforts. Edward Hall explains further:

When two people talk to each other their movements are synchronized. Sometimes this occurs in barely perceptible ways, when finger, eyelid (blinking), and head movements occur simultaneously in sync with specific parts of the verbal code (the words with pitches and stresses). In other cases, the whole body moves as though the two were under the control of a master choreographer. ...Viewing movies [of the details of human communication] in very slow motion, looking for synchrony, one realizes that what we know as dance is really a slowed-down stylized version of what human beings do whenever they interact (Hall, 1976, p. 72).

Rhythmicity probably is not the sole mainspring of human behavior as hailed by this new brand of psychology. However, research contains ample, promising new data, pertinent for all of us in search of more skillful and effective efforts for working with children and adults amid relevant social context.

This research and practice is in line with today's recent scientific emphasis upon nonlinear perspectives (Kuhn, 1976, p. 49). Moreover, an

exploration of the forces of rhythmicity reflects also the notion of "chaos theory" (Gleick, 1987) with its stress upon minutiae as the key elements of energy and change: be it the quartz, the inherent minute constellation of the gene, or the little recognized pulse of human interactions. These more recent perspectives upon life steer us away from a Darwinian obsession with locating and pursuing a single hierarchical superstructure for human existence and move us toward the diversity of life with each person's multi-potentials. And for the human relation fields, these studies can add much to our own search for developmentally sound and situationally competent care practice.

Rhythmicity as an Essential Ingredient in Human Communication and Development

Infants' and their mothers' (or other relevant caregivers') early attempts to establish communication with each other are essentially prototypes for all initial critical relationship-formations. The caregiving person "falls into step" with the baby's cycle by talking and smiling in a kind of "dance."

If the mother falls out of step and disappoints the infant by presenting a still, nonresponsive face while the infant gazes at her, the infant becomes "concerned" [frustrated], and keeps trying to get her attention (Hersh & Lewin, 1978, p. 3). Typically, caregiver and infant try to stay in touch in a cyclical pattern. It is a process of mutual inclusion; both parties search for a way to establish and maintain a joint rhythm.¹

Similarly, lullabies and patty-cake and other child-rearing activities provide a repertoire of caregivers' actions that evoke predictable responses. These, in turn, cause the adult to feel more care-effective and the child more secure and powerful. The practice skills in communication of both parties are subsequently enhanced (Lind & Hardgrue, 1978, p. 8).

Fathers or any care interactors establish their very own communicative patterns with infants. As early as three weeks of life an infant is a communicator on the basis of the rhythmic patterns that can be witnessed by the movements of their finger, toe, hand or foot (Brazelton, 1981, pp. 144-147). These findings alert us to be aware for similar evidence of effective (rhythmic) communication with individuals along the life span (possibly noticing slight eye, body or breathing movements).

An awareness of conjoint engagement will likely help us to pace our interactions. It can further our capacity to interact and to speak *with* rather than to a person. It seems that the focus partially shifts from what we do or say to finding *together* a synchrony: recognizing "the kind of rhythm they are moving in, as well as the many tiny unnoticeable events that make up any transaction" (Hall, 1976, p. 71). These observations have an important potential message for care interactions: finding a mutual and sustained rhythm is one challenge of care work. It is interesting that children and youth have always spotted this necessity typified by a wish "to be in sync" with another.

This new understanding of the impact of rhythmicity upon close personal relations requires, in care practice, the progression from mere sensitivity to purposeful enmeshment with the individuals served. While talking or walking, playing or working, eating or just being together, careworkers and youngsters need to grant each other mutual investment so as to be *fully* with each other. As noted, we learned from the interplay between infant and caregiver that they had to find and fulfill each other's rhythm. So also in the subsequent encounters all along the life span, the adult and youngster have to fall into "the rhythm of relationship" (Moustakas, 1981, p. 20). In other words, it is not merely the content of the phrases exchanged nor the nature of the activities in which they are engaged. Significantly, it is also the give-and-take with clear cycles of approach and withdrawals, continuously maintaining each other's rhythm, that create meaningful relationship. This quality of reciprocity presents value in times of "just" being together as well as in active engagement. In care work, being in each other's presence, sitting comfortably together, and in particular having ample leisure time for constructive loafing are vital moments of "flow" for living and developing together. The natural evolvment of being in synchrony is worthwhile in itself.

In Edward Hall's fascinating observations (1976, pp. 65-66) of a grade school's playground behavior, children are observed running and skipping at random. Each child apparently is doing his or her own thing, transversing much of the play area. When a film of them was reviewed at lower speeds, the researchers detected, to their amazement, "that while the group was moving in synchrony to a definite rhythm...not only was there a rhythm and a beat, but the beat seemed familiar" (p. 66) as if it were from a contemporary rock tune.²

With this and other research findings in mind (Birdwhistle, 1970; Brody, 1977; Condon, 1975; Davis, 1982; Gleick, 1987; Hall 1976; and Moustakas, 1981), it seems that we might have to learn to listen, to look and explore in a new way to find the "pulse" of groups with which we are working. The hubbub in the dining room might not necessarily be a melee of noises; the excitement in the living area may reveal a source for finding rhythm and commitment for some kind of joint action. The loud noise in the shower room might merely reflect a joint rhythmic experience of exuberance over being unattended "uncovered" with each other. We know from our own work with children or youth out-of-doors that it is not the noise per se but the rhythm of the encounters of these voices which conveys the youngsters' degree of contented togetherness.

We all have witnessed in moments of uncomfortable tension, in the dining room, a single rhythmic banging of a spoon, even as an accidental occurrence, may be picked up in a flash by a whole chorus of spoon bangers! Indeed, at times such evidence of rhythmic unity may be a desirable response to severe uneasiness and a probable manifestation of repressed underlying process behavior. This same process of contagious behavior can be found in the rhythmic chanting or clapping at rallies and demonstrations, marches, etc.

Bolstering of Rhythmic Experience

The implications of all these spontaneous pulsations are significant. But more important, building on this knowledge, other efforts can be purposefully introduced. Great numbers of rhythmic-prone opportunities are available to us: greeting someone by fully entering into the rhythm by an embrace, handshake, or casual wave. The built-in rhythmicity of a ball toss, walking in unison, or in giving a backrub. Each of these special moments of oscillating cycled interactions fosters togetherness. Joint rhythm offers the most promising chance of course, in such activities as dance, kinesthetic movements and in common musical experience. All of these activities have high promise for blending each others' rhythms, linking peers with peers, or one generation with another.

The Beat of One of Many Drummers?

The binding qualities of rhythm must not be confused with the lockstep quality of the single drummer's efforts to gain conformity. True rhythmicity, in contrast, requires a process of mutual engagement and inclusion, a response to the beat of several drummers. Such an awareness separates for us the modality that highlights the authority of a single voice, an overriding call upon control and order, in contrast to a modality that recognizes the necessity to link together many diversified individuals into a functional whole. The former entails a linear approach with a hierarchical muster, citing the band director and band as an ideal unit. The latter can be conceived as an assembly moving rhythmically. This model is akin to a disco where each person carries his or her own interpretation and movements of the event but remains strongly in sync with the beat of the music. Such a "dance" with its multipolar (nonlinear) configurations implies order and control but these elements are subordinate to the pattern itself.

Rhythmicity as a Source of Predictiveness

In infancy, baby and caring adults attempt to find each other's rhythm, ultimately achieving assurance of each other's accountability. They both gain an awareness that life is and can be *predictable*. They discover that there is order in the world (Piaget, 1954) (a powerful learning for the infant and most likely a reassuring experience for the caring adult).

It is notable too that infants' and young children's toys and games provide a rhythmicity, self-actualized repetition, as their hallmark. Just to cite a few: rattles, peek-a-boo play, or pattycake, swinging on a swing, nursery rhymes and songs. Rhythmicity assures continuous predictable circular responses as indicators of the immediate course of events (Piaget, 1954, p. 66).

It is no wonder that children as well as adults tend to rely upon rhythmic experience when facing stress, frustration and uncertainty. For instance, tapping one's foot or fingers, as if to assure oneself predictability at moments when one waits desperately for a tardy bus, inviting a friend for a casual football toss after a stressful day, or finding recourse in needlepoint, with its demand for predictable regularity.

Rhythmic experience can be impactful in furthering a sense of well-being and internal cohesion. Repetition within any one activity provides a promise of continuity and a touch of permanency by locating predictability. Our own experience with children verifies Piaget's classic research (1954) that children's play is basic to their learning. It is also a vehicle for forecasting and becoming aware of continuity patterns in the processes of living. We observe the potential mode of learning for young children as they repetitiously waterplay, in their repeated reliance upon the bouncing balls, or their seeming nonending trials with marbleshoot or nintendo games!

Such understanding challenges us to build in resources that invite repetitive play. For example, provision of huggable stuffed animals (a joy for young children and adolescents alike), simple and more complex toy objects for juggling or fingering, and such good old stand-bys as tapes, together with a common tape recorder. Most important, items like these are not necessarily to be programmed or to be stowed away on a shelf. They should be left out at random in order to be at hand when needed.

Rituals are Often Institutionalized Rhythmicity

Rituals in many ways constitute an institutionalized form of rhythmicity (Maier, 1987, pp. 47-48). They culturally confirm a repeated and valued practice, which brings the participants an experience of togetherness. In group care, and for children and youth in general, rituals have particular significance so long as they represent the youngsters' rituals rather than the adults' ordained routines. Joining in the same song at the beginning of a meal, formation of a friendship circle, or a joint prayer can be a unifying experience or an arduous routine, depending whether these activities have been spontaneously internalized or serve essentially as an adult's need for orderliness. The latter is apt to be shrugged off as a "drag" while the former would mutually enhance the comfort level.

Actually, as far as it is known, all greeting rituals, regardless of their cultural or ethnic roots, have rhythmicity as a vital ingredient: the German or the powerful black handshake, the "give-me-five," the oriental bowing, the continental kiss on each cheek, the waving of farewell and many others, serve as a gesture of unity—however momentarily. Folk practice is so wise! As already cited, such practices deserve to be utilized, not so much for the sake of politeness but for their binding qualities, their inherent ingredients of rhythmicity.

In Closing

Clark Moustakes sums up the intrinsic need for rhythmic interactions: "In a sense all rhythm is drama, is dance, is play. The therapeutic focus with children [or youth] from the start concentrates on the rhythms of relationship, and on the rhythms of play" (1981, p. 20).

Notes

¹ Lester and Associates; research (1985, p. 15) reveals that rhythm in attention and nonattention interactions are more difficult to establish for pre-term babies.

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