



Abstract

When we first encounter past traumatic experiences in ourselves, we are left with a conundrum; how are we to move forward in our everyday lives and thrive, rather than just cope and survive? By participating in the Belly2Belly ritual, providing analytical reflections and a detailed account from an auto-reflexive perspective, I attempt in this thesis to show, through the Belly2Belly ritual, how participants progress from a state of ill-being into a state of well-being, a form of *evolution of well-being*. This, it can be argued, takes form when the ritual participants are provided with the opportunity to engage with their unconscious habitus and autonomous physiological reactions through embodiment of intimacy. The Belly2Belly ritual in this case was taught as a facilitator course by the Embodied Intimacy community which is run by Rachel Rickards and Buster Rådvik. Belly2Belly's aim is for their participants to become socialized in a way of being that embodies a somatic awareness which ultimately helps them make sense of their everyday life. As the participants of the practice engage with the ritual, they are faced with drifting understandings of self-perception due to the nature of the ritual and thanks to the socialization in the contextual intimate environment. Here, two concepts are presented as the participants engage with the Belly2Belly ritual, namely *negotiating somatic consent* and *quality of safety*. They both represent accounts for how the participants, through the nature of the ritual, are to navigate in the embodiment of intimacy, and so to help them overcome difficulties associated with intimacy related trauma. This intersubjective experience is supposedly regulated through a concept called co-regulation and employs the contested polyvagal theory to explain how it does so. In this thesis, I reflect on these topics through a range of relevant social theory, with a main focus on Sabah Mahmood's account of the restructuring of habitus through socialization, as well as Kym Maclaren's account of the embodiment of intimacy.

Keywords

Quality of safety, Belly2Belly, Liminality, Interpretive drift, Embodiment of intimacy, Embodiment, Lived religion, Intimacy, Co-regulation, Intercorporeity, Ritual, Auto-reflexive ethnography, Negotiating somatic consent, Habitus, Socialization, Polyvagal theory.

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“Right there, on the edge, is where you’re ice-skating the thin line
between science and spiritual experience”

Barbara Weavers, participant

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1. Introduction

In a beautiful, large apartment on the top floor of a high building in Wedding, Berlin, is a place called “The Nest”. This well-lit, carefully decorated home is a place of living as well as a place of ritual practice. Conjoined with the main living room and kitchen are individual homes where the collective called Embodied Intimacy live. Adjoined to this living room is the practice room where, over the course of a week, between the 3rd and 7th of October, a select group of individuals, myself included, were taught in the novel practice of *Belly2Belly*. This large room with big open windows that allows you to see the Berlin rooftops acted as a *container* for the following week, where we as participants and future Belly2Belly facilitators would cry, laugh, love and *co-regulate* together in the *shared breathing meditation* that Belly2Belly as a ritual constitutes.

During the week, which elapsed from Monday morning till Friday late evening, we would go on to learn the breathing technique of Belly2Belly, what it means to ‘hold the space’ and the practical components of the ritual itself, as well as going deep into ourselves during this ritual practice. We got to experience what it means to ‘drop down’ into ‘the space’, to be intimate, the power of *co-regulation*, and the ‘healing’ effects of a shared embodied breathing meditation.

We were taught in the act of non-verbal action, or *somatic action*, to find partners in the group as we were guided around the room for the different activities. Over and over again throughout the week, we were encouraged to find new partners to practice together with; daring ourselves and challenging our pre-conceptions to find intimacy and ‘touch’ with these strangers, that over a short (but intimate) period of time would become our friends. In this intimacy, we laid on mattresses covering the floors. We were encouraged to meet in touch wherever it felt right at the moment, without using our voices. We were taught how to engage in consent without words, and to find, through our bodies, what felt right from wrong at any given moment, and to act upon it. This form of non-verbal, ongoing consent I have decided to term *negotiating somatic consent*. It is a representation of an ongoing negotiation of wills and desires that unfolds in the present moment, which requires both partners present and fully engaged. If one or both individuals lose this required presence, it is no longer a conversation between two bodies, i.e., no longer an ongoing “negotiation” and as a result becomes non-consensual. It is when these two bodies ‘discuss’ through touch, through our somatic body functions, that the ongoing consent can be determined and given. This as a result allow for both partners to come closer to

each other, feeling the safety of being held and loved in an intimate setting which ultimately allows for ‘a holding of space’ to occur. This holding then sets the stage for the individuals to come deep down into themselves and access repressed memories and traumas from the past which they can then breath through, collectively, in order to surrender to experiences and perhaps find the ability to let go of them.

In this deep and vulnerable space, closely together in touch on the mattresses on the floor, it feels as if time and space dissolves, and only the vibrational sound of the outbreath, which is a part of the breathing technique, can be heard through the room. Here, the individuals have entered the *liminal state*¹, and the ‘healing’ starts to occur. We begin to *drift in our interpretations* of ourselves, now in this vulnerable state, which helps us to move and shift our understanding of what our trauma has been.² As this movement continues as we keep breathing together, intimately and synchronously, the unraveling of emotions and preconceptual ideas of ourselves can unravel.

And it is here, as if some magic has occurred in this most intimate meeting, where one person, embraced by another, entangled together with a stranger on the floor in complete daylight, that it becomes apparent just how important the *quality of safety* is to the human being. How the quality of safety has the ability to change our understanding of ourselves and others. How this quality of safety can help us open up, to dare to face the internal challenges that we have faced as children, youth and adults, and are now stuck in.

It is this quality, I argue, that has the potential to unlock the full potential of the liminal state; to change our preconceptions of who we are, our actions and our roles; our habitus and our socializations.³ It is here that we can relearn, together, through our bodies, to be whole and safe again.

On the mattresses in-between the practice, sitting side by side, we were taught why this dysregulation occurs. Here, a novel theory is put to use, called *Polyvagal theory*,⁴ which assumes that the body’s nervous system knows dangers about our surroundings through somatic sensations before our minds can comprehend them. When we relearn what it means to feel safe and become socialized in an environment that reaffirms that safety, we can then creatively engage with the world. The polyvagal theory assumes that the ‘vagus nerve’, which regulates

¹ Bell, Catherine, 2009. *Ritual; Perspective and Dimensions*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA: 95.

² Luhrmann, Tanya. M., 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft, Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA: chapter 21.

³ Bell 2009: 77-78.

⁴ Porges, Stephen W., 2021. “Polyvagal Theory: A biobehavioral journey to sociality”, *Comprehensive Psychoneuroendocrinology*, International Society of Psycho-neuro-endocrinology.

the parasympathetic nervous system (the autonomous nervous system that regulates heart rhythm, breathing and the internal organs)⁵ also helps to regulate our experienced state of safety. It is this nerve that we, through the practice of Belly2Belly, are assumed to calm and regulate when we engage in safe, negotiating somatic consensual, intimate meetings. Here is where the co-regulation supposedly occurs.

And the purpose of all of this? To enter a state of being which allows for the individual to find a safe space inside oneself which allows for the internal processes and traumas to unfold. This in turn helps the individual progress into a more fulfilled and calm life where the well-being of the self is put first and foremost, so that the well-being of all others can come into being. Because, the central part of pleasure seen from the Belly2Belly perspective, is that you *feel it*; and if you do not, and instead act as you do feel it, you will presumably be of disservice to yourself and your peers. Healing is the process where an integration between several dissociated parts become merged into a whole, made sense out of, and *embodied* as a lived experience.⁶

1.1 Background

This body of work came about as an ethnographic field study in the realm of anthropology of religion. Ethnography is the practice of participating in people's everyday lives, observing their actions, behaviors, habits and activities, usually over an extended period of time in order to collect information and material regarding a topic of interest. This topic usually forms a theory, either prior to the study or during the study which in turn becomes explored through the gathered material.⁷

Over the span of one week, I observed and participated in a facilitator training in a practice called Belly2Belly, which is a non-sexual, coupled breathing meditation.⁸ It was hosted by Rachel Rickards and the Embodied Intimacy community at their home named "The Nest" in central Berlin. The Embodied Intimacy community was founded by Rachel Rickards and Buster Rådvik.

Buster is an educated psychotherapist from Sweden whose main practice is centered around sensory-motor psychotherapy. It is a form of psychotherapy which focuses mainly on

⁵ <https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/vagus-nerve#anatomy-and-function> – visited 2022-12-28.

⁶ McGuire, Meredith B., 2008. *Lived Religion; Faith and Practices in Everyday Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA: 15.

⁷ O'Reilly, Karen, 2012. *Ethnographic Methods; Second edition*, Routledge, New York, USA: 2-3.

⁸ <https://www.embodiedintimacy.com/workshops> - accessed 2022-11-10.

the body and “which includes in itself trauma, awareness and trauma therapeutic healing”⁹. Rachel is a self-taught intuitive teacher that have practiced what, in a ‘western context’ has been popularly known as tantric practices over several years. Her ‘intuitive knowing’ of the somatic practices is fundamentally what taught us how to engage, heal and grow.

Created by David Cates, who is a tantric teacher of over 50 years among other things, has since passed the practice down to Rachel and Buster to continue the journey for others into this space of trust and healing.

Being the primary topic of this research paper, Belly2Belly is a practice that involves non-sexual intimate shared breathing experiences. It uses a special breathing technique that helps the participants co-regulate together. Its fundamental approach is to heal trauma using this intimate breathing, which centers around trust to further intimate engagement. It is when we engage in this ritual, and ‘drop down’ into the meditative state together, that this supposed healing occurs.¹⁰

The Belly2Belly ritual can be seen from a greater general context of concurrent neo-tantric practices, therapeutic models, healing rituals and spiritual groups.

A vast amount of research surrounding these topics lays the contextual foundation of our understanding of the Belly2Belly practice. Neo-tantric practices, with its roots from global gurus of their time, such as Osho’s Rajneesh movement, are one of many types of practices created to liberate the individual from repressive constrictions of society in order to ‘live to the fullest’.¹¹

Since the counterculture of the 1960’s, and the revolution of individualism in western spiritual practices as influenced from the eastern spiritual practices such as Buddhism and Hinduism, a wave of therapeutic work models and spiritual groups has been created for the ‘wounded’ western individual in their search for ‘healing’.¹²

These movements and practices range from Osho’s humaniversity¹³ to Wiccan women’s circling groups, to a wide variety of syncretic neo-tantric practices that forge old practices such as meditation and yoga together with contemporary knowledge of psychology, physiology, psychiatry and others to provide a new outlook as how to attain this ‘healing’. Therapeutic

⁹ Rådvid, Buster, 2022/10/06. *Transcribed Interview*, Berlin, Germany: 5.

¹⁰ <https://classes.livetantra.com/authors/david-cates> - visited 2022/11/22.

¹¹ Urban, Hugh B., 2022. *The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies*, online edition, Oxford Academic: Chapter “Modernity and Neo-Tantra”.

¹² Oliver, P, 2015. *Hinduism and the 1960s : the rise of a counter-culture*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, UK.

¹³ <https://www.humaniversity.com/about/osho/> - visited 2023/01/13.

models such as psychic healing, also termed therapeutic touch¹⁴, women's circles that gather inspiration from the Wiccan movement and feminist psychotherapeutic approaches¹⁵ and ecstatic dances¹⁶ are a few of many practices that shapes the general context that the Belly2Belly ritual exists within. Contemporary neo-tantric practices such as *Tantra with a Twist*, offers insights into the nature of the concurrent development of syncretic relationships between ancient spiritual practice and modern relational practices. The creators of *Tantra with a Twist*, and similar practices, attempt to find new techniques of self-understanding in the mainly western landscape of 'healing practices' for the practitioners to learn to navigate their own incongruencies.¹⁷

Usually, the binding element throughout this field of practices is an emphasis on the holistic theory of interoperability; They are done with mind, body and spirit in an attempt to resolve the 'dis-ease' we feel as a result of our contemporary society.¹⁸

Seen from this perspective, Belly2Belly is a contemporary ritual that is a result of decades of exploration in tantric, spiritual and new-age practices by western actors. It is a further expression in this search for healing, in a larger context of neo-tantric practices, to resolve this 'dis-ease' by attempting to "heal split parts of our individual wholes"¹⁹ by reconciling traumatic events through the embodiment of intimacy, as we will explore further in this thesis.

The main focus of this thesis will be centered around an auto-ethnographic recollection of the practice of Belly2Belly, Rachel Rickards and Buster Rådvik's teachings regarding the practice, and the ritual aspects of Belly2Belly.

For a closer understanding of how the B2B ritual works, kindly see attachments.²⁰ Throughout this thesis, I will from here on and forward use Belly2Belly and B2B interchangeably.

¹⁴ McGuire 2008: 122.

¹⁵ Ibid: 123.

¹⁶ Ibid: 127.

¹⁷ Twist, Markie L. C., 2022. "Tantra with a Twist: application of an ancient spiritual practice for modern relational communication", *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 37:3: 443-457.

¹⁸ McGuire 2008: 137.

¹⁹ Rickards 2022: 3.

²⁰ Attachments: Belly2Belly template for drop-in-sequence.

1.2 Aim of research & research question

The two main research questions that we will explore in this thesis are as follows:

- What does the ritual process of Belly2Belly look like?
- How do individuals engage with the ritual?

Through this thesis, I will explore topics related to Belly2Belly, such as the shared breathing meditation, its implication for trauma healing, co-regulation and polyvagal theory, as well as *somatic consent work* related to intimate experiences and its importance for implementing a sense of consensual safety. I will further reflect on aspects relating to the quality of safety, the role it plays in the ritual and its importance for a ‘successful’ ritual.

I will also explore the role that habitus and socialization plays as part of a restructuring of habitual unconscious responses for the improvement of well-being for the individual in association with the theory of liminality and interpretive drift.

The different terms used to describe this process, in the words of the embodied intimacy community, such as ‘resonance’, ‘co-regulation’, ‘the field’, ‘space’ and the use of the polyvagal theory are all terms that are fundamental to understanding the practical ways in which Belly2Belly function as a ritual, its theoretical frame for understanding the concept, and where it ultimately aims to lead its participants. To use these terms and explain their function, as a way of understanding the embodied experiences of the individuals, is paramount to depict the multi-dimensional expression that constitutes the Belly2Belly ritual and its larger practice.

1.3 Previous research and material

In my search for previous research, I utilized the key words provided at the beginning of the thesis in an attempt to find either a) research that had been done specifically on Embodied Intimacy as a community and the Belly2Belly practice and b) related research on similar topics. I also searched for similar worded topics not previously stated to see if there were other relevant data for this paper. The scope of my research was limited to ‘LUBsearch’ which is Lund University research catalogue online. The following terms that were used were as follows: Belly2Belly, Embodied Intimacy, Intimacy, Co-regulation, Habitus, Socialization, Liminality,

Shared breathing meditation, Somatic consent, Somatic regulation, Self-regulation, Polyvagal theory, Negotiating somatic consent, Quality of safety.

In the case of Embodied Intimacy and Belly2Belly, no previous research or writings have been done. We also find that in the field of quality of safety, somatic consent, somatic regulation and co-regulated shared breathing meditations there were no previous research. As for the rest, they are presented bellow categorically.

1.3.1 Intimacy, co-regulation, self-regulation and liminality

On the topic of intimacy there is a fair bit;

A PhD thesis, *Organising Intimacy: Exploring Heterosexual Singledoms at Swedish Singles Activities*, covers the topic of the organization of singles' activities and intimacy in Sweden.²¹

An article written on the topic of friendship and intimacy in small Finnish communes which explores how everyday domestic interactions shape intimate relationships in friendship.²²

A book named *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction (Foundations of Human Interaction)*, written by Christian Meyer, Jürgen Streeck and J. Scott Jordan reflects new ways to interpret social interactions from an 'embodied perspective' of how human bodies interact and engage with human-to-human contact, the material and cultural world.²³

Lastly, In the book *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*²⁴ written by Lynn Jamieson, there is a recollection of the problems facing the modern individual and the quest for friendship and intimacy in the modern world. It focuses mainly on gender and interpersonal relationships.

On the topic co-regulation, there is mostly research done on developmental psychology in young infants and how they copy behavior and mechanism from their mothers through touch.

²¹ Henriksson, Andreas, 2014. *Organising Intimacy: Exploring Heterosexual Singledoms at Swedish Singles Activities*, Faculty for humanities and social sciences, institution for sociological and psychological studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden.

²² Heinonen, Anna, 2022. "Friendship at home: every day in domestic space shaping friendship intimacies in Finnish small-scale communes", Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

²³ Meyer, Christian, J Streeck, & J. Scott Jordan, 2017. *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction, (Foundations of Human Interaction)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

²⁴ Jamieson, Lynn, 1998. *Intimacy: personal relationships in modern societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden, USA.

This material is unsuitable for this work due mainly to the lack of transferability between studies done on infants to adult subjects.²⁵

There was a study conducted in Japan on how different forms of bodily regulations in social dynamics for motivation in collaborative activity looks between working adults and students.²⁶

On the topic of self-regulation, not a lot of articles had been written, but the book *Handbook of Self-regulation: Research, Theory, and Applications*²⁷ does provide a comprehensive approach on how to ‘self-regulate’ in individual settings.

On the topic of liminality, a book named *Liminality and the modern living: through the in-between* covers the topic of liminality seen from our contextual society, spanning in research about political, societal and social scientific research.²⁸

A great deal of interesting articles has been produced on this topic, yet none really fit the purpose for this research. This research ranging mostly around work-related self-understanding.

This previous research lays as a contextual foundation for the overall field of study. Although interesting for my research, most lack applicability or are outright outside the field of this subject and has thus been excluded.

1.4 Material

The primary material used in this thesis are my own observations, my experiences as part of my participation, fieldnotes, interviews and diaries that were written and recorded during my stay in Berlin.

The interviews used will be of Rachel Rickards and Buster Rådviik, both founders of the Embodied Intimacy community and teachers of the Belly2Belly practice.

²⁵ Tiziana, Aureli. Presaghi, Fabio & Garito, Maria c., 2022. "Mother–infant co-regulation during infancy: Developmental changes and influencing factors", *Infant Behavior and Development*, Elsevier Inc.: 69

²⁶ Ito, T, and Umemoto, T, 2022. "Self-Regulation, Co-Regulation, and Socially Shared Regulation of Motivation for Collaborative Activity: Comparison Between University Students and Working Adults1." *Japanese Psychological Research* 64 (4): 397-409–409.

²⁷ Baumeister, Roy F & Vohs, Kathleen D, 2011. *Handbook of self-regulation: research, theory, and applications, second edition*, Guilford Press, New York, USA.

²⁸ Thomassen, B, 2014. *Liminality and the modern: living through the in-between*, Routledge, Oxford shire, UK.

The fieldnotes are a recollection of my immediate insights, observations and responses to the continuing and changing environment.

The diaries, both personal and intellectual, reflect my own experience as a participant and observer of the event, as explained by O'Reilly amongst others.²⁹

These three themes will be further explored in the chapter *methods* bellow.

2. Method

This thesis is centered around using the method of fieldwork. I intend to collect empirical data by observing and partaking in the B2B facilitator's course. In this following chapter, we will explore what type of ethnography that will be used in this thesis, the methods, both theoretical and practical that I will use during my fieldwork and subsequent empirical reflection.

Further, I will present an ethical reflection regarding ethnographic fieldwork as well as the necessary limitations I have had to make for this study.

2.1 Tools, methods and ethnographic fieldwork

Here is first presented an account of the different approaches used in this thesis.

2.1.1 Auto-reflexive ethnography

Auto-reflexive ethnography is the study of 'self' in relation to others.³⁰ It is a recollection of self-reflections in relation to the social environment that the ethnographer has observed and participated with. The self-reflection of the experiences and the changes that the ethnographer has endured during the fieldwork reflects back on the studied subject, telling us something about them and the situation as a whole.

As Davies put it:

²⁹ O'Reilly 2012: 104-105, CF. Davies 2013.

³⁰ Davies, Charlotte A., 2008. *Reflexive Ethnography; A Guide to Researching Selves And Others*, Second Edition, Routledge, New York, USA: Chapter 10.

In particular, the focus seems to be on the self, but the self as acted upon and fundamentally altered by contact with others, thus studying such changes becomes a way of providing a view of these others, refracted through this special segment of personal autobiography.³¹

It is during this process, defined as a dialectic relationship between what is called ethnographer-as-self and ethnographer-as-other that generalized knowledge about the social world is produced.³² Ethnographer-as-self is the self-reflexive part that acknowledges the impact of the environment upon self as subject to experience, whilst ethnographer-as-other is the acknowledgement of an attempt to remain objective, observing and studying the object in question in relation to the self.³³

This dialectic can be further scrutinized by looking at it from the perspective of the ethnographer-as-researcher and ethnographer-as-informant. In the case of auto-reflexive ethnography where the researcher becomes both the informant and observer, having the benefit of being the informant yields the insider knowledge required to produce a rich and telling ethnography, whilst being the researcher allows for the theoretical perspective of informed social research.³⁴

The critique of auto-reflexive ethnography is the hardship of staying detached from your own experience. The boundary where self begins - and researcher ends - is a constant tug of war between what is of importance for the research and what the point of the research is about. Depending on what the ethnographer chooses to focus on unavoidably forms a narrative that is always determined by subject and can never be fully objective. The danger is always of becoming so emerged into the environment that there is no longer a distinct definition between what is studied, and the researcher participating in the study.³⁵

Arguably the hardest part is the definitional boundary between what can be seen as relevant general knowledge based on any social situation and the researchers own sense of self, and their attempt to reflect unbiased knowledge.³⁶ I would argue and agree with previous literature that it is impossible to create unbiased social scientific knowledge, but that this should at the same time *not* be considered a hindrance in the search for said knowledge. Rather, I argue that auto-reflective ethnography allows for a more thoughtful and intimate relationship with the

³¹ Ibid: 219.

³² Ibid: 228.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ O'Reilly 2012: 110.

³⁶ Ibid: 110.

produced knowledge due to the close reflexive perspective generated by this constant push between known self and unknown observer, and the border that is in a constant juxtaposition because of the dialectic relationship created between the observer and what is being observed; which in this case happens to be one and the same. The knowledge produced could in many ways be seen as more effective to its outcome due to its intimate and real experience as self, rather than an attempt to say something about others; but only so long as it is consciously informed by the matrix of previous social research which sets the boundaries for what can be seen as informed research.³⁷

2.1.2 Iterative-inductive

For this thesis, I will use an iterative-inductive method to gather my data from the field.³⁸ The iterative-inductive method uses a system, termed by Crang and Cook, as a “read-then-do-then-write model”³⁹. The premises are that as an ethnographer, in order to formulate any new theories, an inductive method needs to be used in order gather data with as little preconception as possible to allow the formulation of theories to unfold. A way to do this is to apply simplistic inductivism, which means to gather data without any preconception whatsoever. One of the main problems with a simplistic inductivism is that it is fundamentally impossible to start out without any preconceived ideas in social sciences.⁴⁰

By applying an iterative-inductive method, I attempt to go out into the field with as few pre-conceived (theoretical) notions as possible, while retaining an intrinsic idea of what I desire to study, whilst still acknowledging that my data, material and writings over time in the field will challenge, change and create new theories and narratives as I go along. This approach allows for situations to unfold, and let the situations speak for themselves. This in turn will allow for “guiding theoretical problems”⁴¹ to emerge which will help me formulate my analytical questions. This is a form of ‘grounded theory approach’, which means that the theories that hopefully will evolve comes out of an engagement with the world, rather than simply being discovered.⁴²

³⁷ Davies 2008: chapter 10.

³⁸ O’Reilly 2012: 29-30.

³⁹ Ibid: 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid: 29.

⁴¹ Ibid: 32.

⁴² Ibid: 202-203.

The downside of using this method is that it can become too open-ended and might leave you with little to no relevant data to show for. One might say that that in itself (not finding any relevant data) simply shows the process of science. The importance is to be aware of the fact that any inductive method has the short coming of *wanting* to explore something that at the outset might be promising, but in the end yields no results.

2.1.3 Interpretivism or subtle realism?

I will be approaching my field study from a mainly interpretivistic perspective.⁴³ Interpretivism, being a philosophical branch of social sciences, argues that it is paramount to observe humans as actors in the social world, and not simply as objects reacting to the natural world.⁴⁴ Born out of the ideas of Immanuel Kant and Max Weber, it attempts to understand why individuals acts as they do, usually in context to their particular society and culture.⁴⁵

The critique of interpretivism is centered in both realism and relativism.

Realism as a school of thought was born out of structural Marxist theories and emphasizes the importance of finding underlying structures that impacts human behavior.⁴⁶ Realism attempts to see the world where human beings and their interpretations of the world are not the only component that constitute that world; but rather involves other complex operations unknown to the actors.⁴⁷

Relativism was born out of critical theorists' attempts to decouple social science from natural science, arguing instead that social science's task was to free humans from oppression or domination rather than attempting to find absolute universal truths. These ideas were shaped by individuals such as Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. Relativism on the other hand argues that there is no single truth, and that any claim to knowledge of absolute truth is false. Therefore, any claim to knowledge that might have arisen from fieldwork is relative and will share equal validity of any other report that might arise.⁴⁸

Hence, both approaches criticize interpretivism on the basis that it is implausible to only observe humans as actors in the world, unrelated to more complex underlying structures as well as the knowledge produced can never be validated as truthful reflection.

⁴³ Ibid: 52-55.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid: 56-57.

The term coined by Martyn Hammersley; subtle realism is the approach to social sciences that attempts to reconcile positivism, which is the “application of empiricist natural science to the study of society...”⁴⁹, with the relativistic approach. In its attempt, it seeks to recognize the actuality of the social world whilst simultaneously accept its infinite complexity. This social world can then only be known “from the focused collection of evidence”⁵⁰. The subtle realists also acknowledge that knowledge in itself is always limited, that “it is open to being proved false”⁵¹, and that it requires a consistent reflexive engagement to determine its ongoing validity in the current social context and environment.⁵²

Thus, like many researchers before me, I’ve found myself in a predicament regarding absolute use of any philosophical method in this paper, and instead will adopt both interpretivism and subtle realism in a syncretic way to better understand the full scope of expressions and understandings that might arise in the field.

2.1.4 Participation-observation

The main method that I will use during my field study is participation-observation.⁵³ Participation-observation uses both participation to gather data out in the field as a reflexive practice whilst simultaneously acting as a semi-detached observer, observing the act or situation from a distance.⁵⁴ The reason I use the term “semi-detached”, is because no matter how you conduct your research, you will always have a bias towards what you are studying. You can never be fully detached as you as an individual play a role in the unfolding of the situation, and your presence will one way or another (unless completely overt) have an effect on your surroundings.⁵⁵

As part of the participation-observation method, an ongoing sampling will be used to determine which situations, interviews and practices are to be taken next. In essence, ongoing sampling assumes a certain amount of improvisation as the researcher engages with its environment and ideas arise as the ongoing engagements take place.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ibid: 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid: 58.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid: 58-59.

⁵³ O’Reilly 2012: chapter 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid: 104-112.

⁵⁵ Ibid: 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid: 44-45.

2.1.5 Fieldnotes

As part of my field study, I intend to take fieldnotes in form of handwritten notes as I am participating and observing.⁵⁷ Whilst taking notes, I will categorize them into 5 separate subcategories which will later serve as the base for my larger thematic categorization. The following subcategories are as follows: a) daily notes, b) interviews, c) theory, d) sessions e) personal notes.

I also intend to use diaries to document my experiences, insights, thoughts and reflections. I will utilize two separate diaries; one personal to reflect on my experiences, and one academic to reflect on my role as an ethnographer and the theoretical frameworks that hopefully will present themselves.⁵⁸ The intended use of these diaries is to create the multi-colored perspectives that make up the complex matrix of auto-reflexive ethnography.

2.1.6 Interviews & transcriptions; spontaneous and pre-determined, semi-structured and unstructured.

For the upcoming field study, I will utilize verbal recordings and interviews in combination with notes taken on the spot. Some of these interviews will be pre-determined and agreed upon prior to my arrival, and some I intend to seek out spontaneously whilst present. These will then be transcribed and form the basis of my study.⁵⁹

As for the structure of these interviews, I intend to utilize both semi-structured and unstructured interview styles. A semi-structured interview style uses both an open-ended, free-flow approach which allows for the interviewee to explore the questions and share more openly, whilst simultaneously keeping to a semi-set agenda with boundaries to what is to be discussed. An unstructured interview is "... more like a conversation than an interview"⁶⁰, where several topics are free flowing, enters into and digress from different topics and subjects. The interviewer might have a topic in mind which starts off the conversation, but the interviewee is allowed to respond, argue and relate however it chooses to.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid: 101-104.

⁵⁸ Ibid: 104-105.

⁵⁹ Ibid: chapter 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid: 120.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Due to nature of these interviews, minor changes have been necessary whilst quoting for ease of reading without tampering with the meaning or context.

2.1.7 Access: internet tools and reach out

In order to gain access to the Belly2Belly event which I will base my study on, I'll be reaching out to founder Rachel Rickards through the Facebook group called "Embodied Intimacy".⁶² This is a moderated group which requires acceptance to gain access to but is free to join. In this group, a majority of their events are posted. In order to attend the Belly2Belly facilitator training one must complete a form and gain official acceptance.

2.1.8 Overt participation

This study will be done using overt research. Overt research, in contrast to covert research, means that the study is conducted with full knowledge of the participants, where my identity as researcher is made known and a full disclosure of the study is provided; and where the participants can provide consent to participate in the study.⁶³ Any and all personal material such as interviews, fieldnotes, recordings and diaries gathered during my fieldwork will be anonymized and not made available to other persons unless approved by the participants. Unless given consent, verbal or written, all names will be anonymized.

2.1.9 Funding

I did not receive any financial incentives to conduct this research and have done so completely out of my own free will. All expenses, such as transportation, food and living were paid for by me.

The event itself was provided out of grace by the Embodied Intimacy community, but only after the decision to attend had been made from my part. I did anticipate, out of hope, to at least have the cost partially reduced for attending the event. The fact that it was free of charge was only bonus.

⁶² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/EmbodiedIntimacy> - visited 2022/11/14.

⁶³ O'Reilly 2012: 62-74.

2.2 Thematical qualitative analytical discourse

As part of my research, I intend to implement a qualitative thematical approach to my analysis. My intention is to search for overarching themes from the gathered data through coding of the material.⁶⁴ I then aim to utilize these themes to depict a multi-perspective view of the practice of Belly2Belly. By utilizing this method, I gain the advantage of finding underlying structures that I can bring into light. These structures, in combination with relevant social theories, can then be used to shine light onto the practice of Belly2Belly and how it fundamentally works. One of these instances, as an example, consists of how informed consent arises through non-verbal somatic engagement.

2.3 General ethnographical ethical concerns

As with all studies that involve other people and their experiences, an ethical code of conduct is required which reflects the autonomy of all participants. When conducting ethnographic research, ethics is an important aspect that the researcher needs to keep in mind. The researcher holds the responsibility that the studied subject(s) sovereignty is respected and upheld. It is the sole responsibility of the researcher to make the participants aware of the study, how it is conducted, what it involves, why it is conducted, what is being researched, that informed consent is taken, that the participants have the rights to acquire any and all transcripts and recordings regarding that particular individual and that all materials are made anonymous if so desired.⁶⁵

This form of informed research is termed overt research. The ethical dilemmas that arise from the different use-cases of overt and covert research rest in the difficulties of each studied subject and situation. It is better to think of ethical research in terms of an ongoing and evolving discussion that needs to be judged "... on a case-by-case basis as ethnography takes place"⁶⁶. Most research thread the fine line between being overt and at times somewhat covert. This continuum is a balance between making your participants explicitly aware of your presence and intentions at all times, and simultaneously becoming integrated and familiar in the situation

⁶⁴ Kuckartz, Udo, 2014. *SAGE Research Methods, Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice & Using Software; Three Basic Methods of Qualitative Text Analysis*, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, UK: Chapter 4.

⁶⁵ O'Reilly 2012: chapter 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid: 62.

which inevitably allows for the kind of interactions that is meant for the study.⁶⁷ This form of ethical complexity is present when conducting research where the purpose is to expose underlying structures, where it is simply not possible to always be overt about your practices.⁶⁸

One could argue that the only time explicit overtness is not used is "... if you are worried about breaking confidence, risking anonymity or causing harm"⁶⁹. This is especially so if you are conducting research that might expose corruption, trafficking or other illegal practices that might have immediate repercussions towards others.

Simultaneously, it is important that the researcher does not take advantage of the situation at hand and exploits the studied subjects that they have become familiar with. It is easy as a subject to forget that you are being studied when the researcher becomes your close friend and sometimes confidant. Here it is the researcher's responsibility to make sure that they balance the power dynamic that occurs between researcher and subject.

It is well known that the researcher, out of virtue of their position, gets placed in a power dynamic that reflects the relationship between the observer and the observed.⁷⁰ The subjects that are being studied might feel compelled to provide consent out of pressure to comply with the researcher, or simply conduct themselves in a manner that they otherwise would not have.

The researcher should always reflect on their own position in relation to the studied field and be aware of the effect this might have on the studied subjects.

It is equally important to the researcher to stay aware of the responsibilities that they have towards the rights of marginalized communities if those are being studied.⁷¹ It is easy to exploit marginalized groups for academic clout if one is not cautious as to how the gathered material is being put to use and for what purpose.

Lastly, one could argue that, whether one conducts overt or covert research, there are certain practices that should not be engaged with due to their being ethical grey areas.⁷² Is it ethical to attend bullfights and supporting bullfighting businesses by attending these events as a researcher? And where does those grey area begin and end when studying addicts who are in the midst of their addiction? In the case that such research topics are approved for research, it is up to the researcher to make sure that the study is being conducted as fairly and ethically as possible with the subjects' best intentions in mind.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid: 65.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid: 67.

⁷⁰ Ibid: 68.

⁷¹ Ibid: 69-70.

⁷² Ibid: 72.

⁷³ Ibid.

2.3.1 Pre-attendance reflection

As for my own research, I am anticipating a few ethical challenges during my field study. As the practice of Belly2Belly is an intimate ritual and, what I expect to be, a rather physical experience, there is the dilemma of personal relations and research. Not only could this intimate experience be private, but it could also be exposing to the individual(s) who I am participating with. It might not be to everyone's liking that such intimate experiences be studied. This equally is a reflection which I have to ask myself; as this is mainly an auto-reflexive account of the experiences and practices: how comfortable am I to expose my own inner world to the readers of this thesis? This also raises the ethical concerns about my own autonomy as an individual. Where is the line drawn between researcher and individual, and how do I objectify myself as a subject of study whilst still respecting my own integrity?

Further, the ethical dilemma of ongoing consent is one issue that has to be taken into concern. As noted above, consent is an ongoing process which has to be considered so that the participants consistently feel accounted for in the gathering of material. The balance between overtly acknowledging my presence and my intentions whilst simultaneously becoming a familiar subject in order to let the process unfold is no easy task. I suspect that as the week unfolds, it will be a matter of intuitive awareness that will guide the appropriate movement forward as I balance the need for overt clarity with the natural flow of the setting.

Another ethical concern revolves around becoming intimately close with other participants as the practice unfolds. Seeing that this is an intimate practice, it is uncertain how certain attachments might evolve, and how such relationships might affect my ability to distance myself in such a way that I retain the detached observer perspective whilst I simultaneously engage in a necessary intimacy as part of the practice. Simultaneously, will my position as a researcher affect the way people engage with me? Perhaps the participants feel the necessity to act out of their own boundaries in order to engage with me in such a way that I might "gain" the necessary insights for my study. The power relation between researcher and subject is a concern that must be accounted for.

The question that arises is ultimately how well my own integrity can be maintained during intimate experiences. Equally, it becomes a question of how my own standard of virtue plays a role in the quality of my integrity. Rarely spoken of is the character of the researcher and how that character, with its own flaws, project itself upon the subject; rather than the simple practice

of mentioning that the projection is an inevitable aspect of researcher-subject relations. What constitutes virtue is beyond this discussion, but in the case of ethnographic research, I would at the least argue that honesty, modesty and prudence would lay the foundation for morally informed decision-making.

Furthermore, there is the concern regarding how overtly I present my study and what it involves. The worry revolves around creating expectations upon the participants if I present too much of my intentions about the study. These expectations might change the behavior of the participants as they adjust their actions to my expectations. Simultaneously, it becomes a problem not to be inclusive of my work as this might create concerns and agitations in the participants as they might feel unsafe or uncertain as to what I am doing, which in turn might affect their behaviors in a negative way. The discerning factor will always be a careful balancing between knowing when and how to engage in the most appropriate way.⁷⁴

2.3.2 Post-attendance reflection

Post-attendance, overlooking some of my ethical concerns that I reflected upon above, I would conclude that from an ethical perspective I had a very successful time. My luck resided upon the fact that most, if not all participants present, were very open-minded, allowing and relaxed. This in combination with my own ability to adapt to the situation very well and feeling almost immediately as if I was an insider, allowed for me to become a part of the group quickly. Almost everyone was interested in what I was doing without it being a point of contention at any given moment during the week.

Although the only formal consent to gather data that had been given was provided by Rachel as the teacher, there was a 'silent' agreement that was made between me and the whole group at the beginning of the week and at the end of the event, where I clarified my intentions, what my presence constituted and that any and all material collected would be anonymous. What I mean by silent is that there was no formal individual gathering of consent, but rather a presentation of my presence and what I was there to do, and no one had any opposition towards it. I also made it explicitly clear that all information, such as names, would be anonymous unless stated otherwise, and that if anyone felt that any shared experience or observation should not be included in my reflections, that it would be respected.

⁷⁴ Ibid: 99.

There is of course a grey area here as most participants were not made explicitly aware of my role as a researcher prior to them attending the event. Rachel had given consent to my research prior to participation but had not shared that information with the rest of the group for reasons unbeknown to me. Some individuals were aware of my field study, as I had, about two weeks prior to attending the event, sent out a request in the Embodied intimacy Facebook group and in the event page that I would be conducting research and was looking for voluntary informants.

I would argue that there is an ethical concern here regarding not gaining explicit verbal or written consent from each individual participant. My intuition told me that it was not the time nor the place to ask for this, and the overt attempt to clarify my presence and my intention sufficed for this matter. At any given moment, each participant had the opportunity to opt out of being part of my reflections. Of course, this raises a huge concern from a power differential perspective. Not only was not everyone made aware of my intentions prior to my attendance, but they also did not have a chance to change their minds about attending the event as my attendance was only confirmed some three weeks before the event was to take place. As the cancelation policy states, that four to two weeks prior to the event, a 50% refund can be provided, but a two weeks' notice would result in no refund at all.⁷⁵ This might/could have created ambivalence in the participants if they would have considered whether they should cancel or “stick through” as to not lose their deposit, should they have been made aware of my role as participant.

Equally, everyone might not have been comfortable expressing disapproval to me directly once they would had been made aware of the situation out of fear of reprimands. Ultimately, as discussed in previous segments, that it was my responsibility to make sure to account for each participant's well-being, and it could be argued here that this responsibility was not taken into full account. I will simply state that I did the best I could under the circumstances that was.

I would still argue that the participants acted out of their own free will and were never forced into any discussion or situation that they did not feel comfortable with, not just through my interactions, but also due to the nature of the practice calling for each individual, at their own free will, to choose the partner for the current practice.

Here I would rather state that I had ethical concern for myself. I would sometimes reach beyond my own boundaries to have experiences that I was not comfortable with. This puts into question the concerns of responsibility towards my own well-being. I did not expect prior to

⁷⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/events/471184008107947/> - visited 2022-/11/16.

my involvement that this could arise as a problem. Prior to venturing out I did not know that I would become subject of study, and hence did not account for my potential form of self-exploitation and the subsequent stressful situations that occurred.

Ultimately, the decision to not ask for explicit consent rested in the prudence of recognizing what that outcome would have meant for the situation. I argue here that no harm has been done due to the anonymity of the study, the otherwise overtness of my presence, my attempt prior to, during, and after the event to make my present overt, as well as the open stance that I took during the event to welcome all questions and discussions. The only attempt at staying covert that I made, was to not be explicitly overt with what I specifically was looking for (whilst still being clear upon what the subject of interest was) as to not create expectations upon the participants. There is of course always the possibility that my announcement of participation could have shaped the participants responses beforehand, altering their engagement with me during the event. There is also the fact that it was not completely clear to myself what I was looking for due to the grounded data collection approach that the iterative-inductive method involves. I will note that formal consent was asked for and provided in relation to the people whose stories have been shared and reflected upon in this thesis.

Furthermore, the ethical concern raised in the pre-attendance section regarding uncertainty around intimate relations turned out to be of no major concern. There were a few situations that arose which tested my own boundaries and how I would interact during the practice, which would be expected as part of the participation-observation method and the beginner position that I as an aspiring researcher hold.

Overall, considering the major ethical concerns that could have arisen during my field work, most that occurred were solved on a case-by-case basis.

2.4 Research limitations

When I realized just how much data and material that I had gathered during my field work, I recognized that I was going to be forced to cut out parts to stay within the boundaries the task. There were several interviews, informal and formal, as well as fieldnotes and reflections that have been cut as to fit the size of this thesis.

I recognize that the amount of data and material gathered is more than what is expected on this level of academics. Although it is with remorse that I will be forced to exclude parts to

fit the size of this thesis, I recognize the necessity to do so; and the important ability of any of student to adhere/conform to the necessary limitations of a research task.

3 Theory

In this following chapter, I present the relevant theories, definitions and terms that I will use whilst reflecting and analyzing the gathered material. Some of the terms presented are novel and will require further explanation, others are contextual to the current scientific literature, and some are invented by myself (with the help of others) and are informed by the matrix of social research that came before me.

It is my intention to overlap these terms and definitions, much like a shoestring is tied to a boot, to string a narrative which shows the interoperability of these in order to tie a whole.

3.1 The emic of Belly2Belly

The primary material used in this thesis is the collected material from my fieldwork, as well as relevant literature to understand the emic of Belly2Belly. These include my fieldnotes, diaries, interviews, books and articles, and other material provided during the Belly2Belly practice.

3.1.1 Healing

Before moving forward, it is important to mention that ‘healing’ in this case, and throughout this thesis, is seen from Rachels perspective. Healing constitutes, in her own words: “healing [to me] is integrating the split parts of our being back into the wholeness that we innately are.”⁷⁶ This meaning that healing is to mend or tend to ‘wounds’ (psychological, and sometimes experienced physiological, hurtful and traumatizing experiences) that have arisen as we have moved through life. In the case that I would use the word ‘healing’ in any other context than the one mentioned above, I will make a due comment in that regard.

⁷⁶ Rickards 2022: 3.

3.1.2 Polyvagal theory

Introduced by Steven Porges, who is a professor of Psychiatry at the university of North Carolina, and professor emeritus at both the university of Illinois and the university of Maryland⁷⁷, In the article *Polyvagal Theory: A biobehavioral journey to sociality*, Porges discusses the novel, yet unproven theory, of an evolutionary biological system that regulates the autonomous bodily response towards the fight, flight and freeze mechanism. It introduces the idea that the vagus nerve, a nerve regulating the autonomous nervous system, supposedly acts as a central regulatory function to this fight and flight mechanism. It reflects upon how this evolutionary system evolved and how this function relates to trauma-stress response from the body and its impact on social relations.⁷⁸

Its fundamental use-case in the Belly2Belly practice is that it provides a frame to understand how the body deals with the stress-trauma response, and then through the use of the special breathing technique help calm down, or ‘regulate’ the body. The polyvagal theory acts as a way to help us understand social interactions and behavior as neuro-biological function.

Although this theory is novel and clearly contested, it lays a foundation for how individual behavior and relational behavior interacts, and how it forms a larger structure for human interaction from the ontological point of views of the subjects of this research. This theory is imperative to understand the emic nature of the B2B ritual and how it teaches the participants to understand their unconscious autonomous physiological reaction to trauma.

This article is necessary for understanding how the practice of Belly2Belly is assumed to work and how the participants understand themselves in an embodied expression.

This theory will be used to further understand how the Belly2Belly is imagined in helping facilitate a co-regulative experience, and their (The Embodied Intimacy community) understanding of its implications for helping individuals engage with autonomous traumatic stress responses and help them heal.

⁷⁷ <https://www.stephenporges.com/about> - visited 2022-11-17.

⁷⁸ CF. Porges 2021.

3.1.3 Co-regulation

As part of the Belly2Belly practice, a large focus rests on the term co-regulation. In order to understand co-regulation, we must first understand the use-case for it. When the body enters into a fight-flight-freeze autonomous trauma response, our nervous systems become reactive, and we lose our sense of safety. This state supposedly creates a feedback loop which further triggers our traumatic response which in turn further exacerbates the fight-flight-freeze response; fear becomes the norm.⁷⁹

Our ability to regulate this response is essential to our feeling of safety and mental health. Observing others regulating their response to a perceived threat (loved ones, parents and the like), helps us to understand our own ability to do so. Further, when we engage with people who have this ability to self-regulate, it helps us regulate ourselves. As Dr. Porges describe it: “We mirror the autonomic states of those around us”⁸⁰.

Co-regulation is then better understood as the ability to regulate this autonomous response with other human beings. Our ability to co-regulate is established in childhood, and our lack in this ability as adults is what supposedly causes feelings of distress and fear in frightful situations, both externally and internally. This is not the same as being in a dangerous situation when the fight-flight-freeze response is necessary to our survival, but rather the response to social situations and traumatic events in the past which triggers this response in everyday settings and scenarios.⁸¹

To further understand how co-regulation is supposed to function, the book *How to Do the Work: Recognize Your Patterns, Heal from Your Past, and Create Your Self* written by Dr. Nicole LePera will be used as a ‘bridge’ between the practice of Belly2Belly and the scientific literature written in lay terms. This book is a modern account, written for a primarily western audience, of how an individual might approach themselves to better understand themselves and their unconscious habitual responses. It is a self-help book based in relevant contextual psychological scientific literature, as well as emerging, contested scientific literature on how the body handles and deals with trauma, how the body deals with autonomous reactions to dangerous situations, and how both of these in conjunction with childhood psychology play a

⁷⁹ CF. Porges 2021.

⁸⁰ Porges, Steven, 2017. *The Polyvagal Theory*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, USA.

⁸¹ LePera, Nicole, 2021. *How to Do the Work: Recognize Your Patterns, Heal from Your Past, and Create Your Self*, The Orion Publishing Group Ltd, London, UK: Chapter 4.

role in our self-understanding and our everyday lives.⁸² I note duly that this book is not of scientific standard and is only used as a means to further the understanding of how the Belly2Belly practice approaches the understanding of how individuals engage with their everyday reality.

The main purpose of the Belly2Belly practice is to use this co-regulation ability in an attempt to re-align individuals with the feeling of safety and love in order to heal traumatic responses and memories together.⁸³

3.1.4 The container

The ‘container’ is an abstract notion of a shared experience that the participants become enveloped in as part of the ritual setting.

we have the overarching ‘container’ which both Rachel and Buster speaks of, which, in idea, is the created ‘we space’ of individuals coming together to practice and participate in the B2B ritual. This space (or room) is ‘held’ by a facilitator which acts as the central operator which the participants engage through.⁸⁴ The facilitators capacity to ‘hold’ this space is definitive for the quality of the ritual. The quality in this case being the safety which the participants can feel which ultimately encourages and allows them to move closer and experience the difficulties that may arise in this intimate setting.

3.1.5 The harvesting circle

The ‘harvesting circle’ is the determined end of the Belly2Belly ritual, where the individuals come together to share their experiences and insights that they have gathered during their engagements. This can be considered, seen from Gregory Bateson’s perspective, to be end of the framework which the larger Belly2Belly ritual rests in. Framing in this case, are set points of indicators which distinguishes parts of a ritual from others, such as a beginning, a transition or an ending.⁸⁵ It is here that individuals get the opportunity to reflect collectively upon the meaning that their engagements have conferred in an attempt to further deepen the shared ‘we’ experience, and ultimately our understanding of ourselves. The idea is that as the individuals

⁸² CF. LePera 2020.

⁸³ Rådvik 2022: 6–10.

⁸⁴ Rådvik 2022: 3–4, Rickards 2022: 3.

⁸⁵ Bell 2009: 74.

move together through these experiences, certain insights acquired by one participant might reflect something in another, and as a result provide further healing. As Rachel notes:

... So pieces drop for different people, but they are really for someone else, or they are really for us as a whole, so part of these harvest circles is around getting that wisdom that is dropping or landing or rising through our bodies or through our shared connection and bringing it to the surface so that we can all be nourished by it.⁸⁶

3.2 Theoretical social research

The secondary material used in this thesis are the theoretical social research revolving around ritual, socialization and habitus. These will provide perspectives to understand how the ritual process takes place, and how the participants move through shifts and changes as they engage with the ritual. A brief research overview on the material used will be provided in the following subchapter.

3.2.1 Research overview

Persuasions of the Witch's Craft; Ritual Magic in Contemporary England

Persuasions of the Witch's craft is the brainchild of Tanya Luhrmann as she conducted field work in England as part of her Ph.D. The study was conducted in the 1980s where she would go on and observe and participate in the Wiccan movement.⁸⁷ Tanya Luhrmann is today a professor in psychology and anthropology at Stanford University.

The book is a reflection on the nature of ritual, magic, belief systems, and symbolism. In this book she presents a novel theory termed *interpretive drift*, which simply reflects upon how an individual, over time, changes their preconceptions and beliefs from one to another. This can be seen as the practical happenings of the liminal process that occurs in different rituals, most notably rites of passage(s), but also in more everyday settings. It is my intention to use this theory as part of my broader analysis of how interpretive drifts occur in the participants (and my own) understanding of how we relate to ourselves, and how the practice of Belly2Belly might beget that change to occur.

⁸⁶ Rickards 2022: 15.

⁸⁷ CF. Luhrmann 1989.

Ritual; Perspectives and Dimensions

Written by Catherine Bell, *Ritual; Perspectives and Dimensions* is a comprehensive work depicting the many aspects and dimensions that are involved in ritual, its formation, the historical context of ritual and the many spectrums of rituals and symbolism.⁸⁸ The book acts as a meta-perspective of the entire field of ritual and involves a broad range of theoretical insights from a vast array of individuals who have been relevant in the field for more than 100 years or so. Catherine Bell, who died in 2008, was a professor and the chair of the religious studies department of Santa Clara University.

I intend to use this book as a reference work to further cement my reflections in peer-reviewed knowledge. Due to its comprehensive nature, it is ideally used to lay a theoretical foundation on a broad range of topics.

Lived Religion; Faith and Practices in Everyday Life

Written by Meredith McGuire, who is a professor emerita of Sociology and Anthropology at Trinity University in San Antonio, *Lived Religion* is an exploration of her own field work of contemporary religion as an embodied practice. The main idea here is that peoples' experiences of religion is not merely theology and theory, but rather a living element in peoples' lives. This religion 'as lived' becomes an embodied practice through the notion that it is experienced on an individual level. The main focus here rests upon the notion that when the sacred becomes reclaimed by individuals in their everyday lives, the embodied practice of religion recenters itself into the control of the individual.⁸⁹

This book explores the concepts relevant to my study, such as how embodiment of ritual and practices creates well-being for the individuals in their everyday life. I will use this book to showcase how this embodiment might look like.

⁸⁸ CF. Bell 2009.

⁸⁹ CF. McGuire 2008.

Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of Salat

This article was written by the late Saba Mahmood, former professor of Anthropology at the university of California, Berkeley.

Rehearsed Spontaneity explores, through Mahmood's own field work, how women belonging to the Muslim religion search for the appropriate way to act spontaneously during certain parts of (everyday) prayer to appease God. It reflects on the concept of habitus, which is the notion that habits are rather cemented parts of human experiences from an early age and that they rarely change, together with the concept of socialization. In this article she relates how the women who participated in the study reorganize themselves, through socialization and rehearsed practice, in order to evoke the necessary change in habitus to produce, what she terms 'spontaneous action'.⁹⁰

This article is relevant for my study as it involves the multi-dimensional aspects of behavioral changes necessary for a developing social identity and experienced personal change. It will act as a base for my reflection on behavioral change as a function of ritual and the practice of Belly2Belly.

I intend to use this article as a fundamental reference when exploring how the Belly2Belly practice works, and how it reflects unto myself and the participants as a lived embodied experience.

Touching matters: Embodiments of intimacy

This article was written in 2014 by associate professor Kym Maclaren at the department of Philosophy at Toronto Metropolitan university in an attempt to understand how intersubjective human interaction functions, and how touch and intimacy lays as a foundational layer for those functions. Proposing the concept of intercorporeity, meaning that two or more bodies share the same experience in their experience of self.⁹¹ Although not the first to introduce this concept, she develops it further and explores its meaning for how embodiment in intimacy both creates

⁹⁰ Mahmood, Saba, 2001. "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of Salat", *American Ethnologist*, American Anthropological Association.

⁹¹ Maclaren, Kym, 2013. "Touching matters: Embodiments of intimacy", Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, Canada.

the self through touch, as well as other. The article states that it is through the knowing of touch that we can be known at all, both to ourselves and others.

This article is suitable for my research as it provides an in depth understanding of how touch, embodiment and intimacy come together to form a sense of self, and how that self-interacts intersubjectively, and intracorporeally, with others. I intend to use it as a reference point in understanding how embodiment of intimacy comes into being and its necessity for understanding how touch and intimacy help create safety and co-regulation during the Belly2Belly practice.⁹²

3.2.2 Liminality

Liminality is a theory that was first introduced in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep and later used by Victor Turner in the 1960s to understand the ritual process. The liminal theory describes three distinct stages of a ritual functioning which can be virtually applied to all ritual. These stages are as follows: Separation (pre-liminal), margin (liminal), and re-organization (post-liminal).⁹³ The idea is that as individuals engage in a ritual, there is a separation between the known status of self in relation to a social structure (and even sometimes oneself), which progresses into an unknown in-between state where you are neither what you were, nor what you are about to become. It is an ambiguous state that reflects the loss of identity, yet no new formation. It later ends with the aggregation, or reorganization into a new position in a social structure, or ones' self-understanding.⁹⁴ The easiest way to visualize this state is to imagine a door between two rooms. The threshold separates the two rooms from each other. When you leave one room for the other, you leave where you were in that room to go into another; but if you were to stop on the threshold in the doorway, you are neither in the prior room or the new room. You are in the in-between.⁹⁵

Closely associated to the liminal theory seen from Turner is the idea of *communitas*, which in essence means a structuralized anti-structure. It is a type of bond which forms a coherence in self-experienced identity, which at the same time acts as the anti-structure to formed identity. It represents the fundamental dialectic relationship of the initiation rite as the individual progress from a state of structural coherence in their contextual social identity

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Bell 2009: 95.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ CF. Luhmann 1989: chapter 21.

towards the antistructure of the liminal state before re-organization into the structure of society again.⁹⁶

Usually, *communitas* center around a committed group who themselves are anti-structural towards the greater structure of society, hence forming a structuralized anti-structure which then in turn use practices to further deconstruct social identity.

This theory is of relevance to this paper as it helps us understand the ritual aspect of the Belly2Belly practice. It helps us see the shift in self-understanding as we progress through the shared breathing meditation.

I will use this theory as a way to understand the shift in self-perception that might occur as the participant move through whatever is brought up as a result of the practice.

3.2.3 Interpretive drift

Interpretive drift is a theory introduced by Tanya Lurhmann which reflects the liminal theory in its understanding of how belief (of ideas, self and others) change over time. The central idea here is that the way we interpret our surroundings ‘drifts’ from one state into another as we learn more about any given subject. Beliefs (can) change in pace with experience, and so moving from being an atheist to becoming a believer (or vice versa) can be seen as a drift in the way a person interprets their internal and external world, often times correlated with an experience.⁹⁷

This theory will be used in adjunction to liminality in an attempt to understand how the participants self-awareness changes as the individual progress through the ritual, and how this drift in perception might look when the individual becomes informed through somatic awareness. This somatic awareness being the shift in self-understanding as the individual engages in co-regulation and perhaps allow for trauma to ‘heal’.

3.2.4 Habitus and socialization

Habitus as a theory emerged in the 1980’s by Henry Bourdieu, borrowing ideas from the likes of Marcel Mauss and Max Weber. The theory reflects upon the idea that social interactions of humans are rarely conscious or explicit. The idea is that certain behavior has been imprinted

⁹⁶ Bell 2009: 40.

⁹⁷ Lurhmann 1989: chapter 21.

and adopted from an early age and is later acted out in social situations in accordance with what is ‘known’, unconscious behavior of the individual.⁹⁸ It is the acted and lived state of ones knowing as a result of the unconscious behavior.

In larger social contexts, this unconscious behavior plays out in relation to others, and usually reaffirms the already known behavior. This imprint of habitus, termed *practical mimesis* by Bourdieu, is known through the process of socialization, where an individual learns through mimicking and practice - unbeknown to the individual - of other individuals’ habits.⁹⁹ The mimicking and practice then become a normalized behavior of the individual.¹⁰⁰ Behavior from other people or social groups that does not conform to the known behavior can be seen as deviant as it challenges the ‘known’ unconscious behavioral patterns of the individual. As explored by Bourdieu and seen through Mahmood, becoming socialized in a context unknown to the individual can have the ability to reform the unconscious habitus so that it affirms to the new social context, as we will explore further in this paper.¹⁰¹

3.2.5 Embodiment

Embodiment as used in this paper can best be understood from two different perspectives. On one end, it is the embodied experience of religion as lived. This embodied experience sits at the center of the individual as they act as autonomous agents in the contemporary world.¹⁰²

As Rachel notes:

For me, this is a ritual that includes devotion and reverence, and accessing some of my highest frequencies or states of being. So, this practice for me is very spiritual. In that way that its God like essence of love and transmitting and being that love.¹⁰³

On the other end, you have embodiment as a physical experience through the sensation of touch. Embodiment here becomes the realized experience of self through touch, both through act of touching others and by others touch. It is in this intersubjective experience between two or more people (or things) that the experience of self as separate occur. One could make the

⁹⁸ Bell 2008: 78.

⁹⁹ Mahmood 2001: 837.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ CF. Mahmood 2001.

¹⁰² CF. McGuire 2008.

¹⁰³ Rickards 2022: 8.

argument of which came first, to touch or be touched? Maclaren argues that they are an intertwined experience that creates the fundamental existence for each other. This intertwined experience is called ‘intercorporeity’. As Maclaren puts it: “... we have rather a [state of] twoness-that-is-also-a- oneness”¹⁰⁴. It is through this somatic awareness that we then engage with the external world.¹⁰⁵

It is thus of importance to understand how embodiment as theory, both as a somatic experience, and as a lived ‘religio-spiritual’ experience, creates a narrative for transformation when engage with practices such as Belly2Belly.

3.3 Results; Coined terms and new concepts

As a result of the conducted fieldwork, two new concepts were coined. Below is a brief description of these terms that will be further explored in the subsequent empirical chapter and analysis.

3.3.1 Negotiating somatic consent

A term coined by me with the help of others¹⁰⁶, negotiating somatic consent is the ongoing process of determining interrelation boundaries through somatic action. These interrelational boundaries are determined through physical interaction and acts as non-verbal forms of communication between one or several individuals. The idea is that our emotional and experienced state of self acts as a compass to determine our needs in the moment in relation to others. Through the Belly2Belly ritual, the individuals are taught to always follow what ‘feels good’ in that moment, and no matter the external result of following this ‘higher need’, to trust that that guiding intuition serves a purpose. The negotiating part is the act in motion, where one or more individuals agree upon where individual boundaries are, and that they are allowed to change continuously.¹⁰⁷

This negotiation does not start at the physical touch, but already at the inception of a meeting with another sentient and sensible being.¹⁰⁸ Here more so through movement and eye-

¹⁰⁴ Maclaren 2013: 100.

¹⁰⁵ CF. Maclaren 2013.

¹⁰⁶ Helmers, Ida, 2022. Ongoing conversations, Malmö, Sweden.

¹⁰⁷ CF. Maclaren 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid: 97.

contact. If the experience of another is experienced as safe enough, a ‘moving closer’ happens, ultimately leading to, if both parties agree, into touch. This can be seen as we, the participants, are encouraged to find another partner to practice with. We are encouraged to ‘feel into’ our needs and act accordingly when approaching or being approached by another participant.

The main point, propagated by the Belly2Belly ritual, is that it is through intimacy that we can become safe enough to dare to engage in closer intimacy. This closer intimacy then leading to the possibility for healing. The negotiating aspect, in correlation with somatic elements of touch, is what allows for trust to emerge between one or more individuals which ultimately allows for the feeling of safety to take place. The consent then naturally arises as the individuals engage with each other. It is essentially attuning into each other’s needs, presently, through somatic, non-verbal communication.¹⁰⁹ No words are needed as the bodies ‘talk for themselves’. It is the precursor that allows for ‘real’ (close) intimacy to take place.¹¹⁰

3.3.2 Quality of safety

This concept came out of one of my engagements during our practices in Berlin, as we will discover later on in this thesis. It came about as a syncretic formation from previous literature that I read long ago, such as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*¹¹¹ and previous dialogues that I have held with a mentor of mine regarding the nature of quality.

The theory of quality of safety is centered around the notion that the *quality* of a situation will beget the possible result of that situation. In this regard, the quality of safety, the induced sense of security that is present as we engage with something frightful or complicated, will act as the catalyst for possible meaningful change.

But before we get the opportunity to engage with these frightful things through the liminality of the ritual, we must first have *communitas* in order for these structures to become anti-structures; i.e., the breaking down of structure in order for it to be rebuilt by virtue of the liminal state and the subsequent re-organization.¹¹²

The structure in place is what will define the quality of safety. A relationship between two individuals can be seen as the structure for which engagements are made. Depending on the quality of safety present in said relationship will induce different outcomes in any given

¹⁰⁹ Rickards 2022: 5, 9-10.

¹¹⁰ Starco, Michel, 2022. “Fieldnotes”, Berlin, Germany.

¹¹¹ Pirsig, Robert M., 1974. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, William Morrow and Company, New York, USA.

¹¹² Bell 2009: 40.

situation. A relationship where trust and safety are fundamental will yield a more secure and daring outlook. Vice versa, a relationship built on distrust and insecurity will only go so deep due to the constant experience of disharmony. Seen from the Belly2Belly perspective, this structure would be ‘the container’.

The quality of safety, as we will explore later on, is the very thing which allows for the safe engagements to occur. Without the intrinsic knowledge of safety present, there is a discrepancy between the individual’s ability to trust the situation and their ability to somatically engage and negotiate safely. *The quality of safety determines the depth that a person can go in any given situation.* I argue that without this inherent experience, very seldomly does the individual *dare* to intentionally engage with frightful or confronting situations.

4. Fieldwork / empirical data

At the start of this thesis, I laid down an outline of the events that occurred during my week-long visit in Berlin with the Embodied Intimacy community. The following section are the observations, reflections and findings that arose as I participated in the B2B facilitator training. As noted previously, these reflections are a recount of my experiences from an auto-reflexive perspective that incorporate relevant social theory and interviews with Rachel and Buster conducted on site.

I will make the due reflection, that I am simply a vessel which reflects on the social situation that I have participated in.¹¹³ These findings are simply a syncretic happening between my own reflection and experiences, and the people and situations that occurred.

To start, we must first understand the underlying structures of the happenings that took place at the week in Berlin. Each of the following topics are in themselves a relevant aspect for the whole. They are not separated, although they can be. But for this text, they are intertwined and tell the story in full. To separate them would be to show each leg of a cow and talk about their separate functions of joints and hoofs, not recognizing that each leg is necessary for the cow to move as a whole. Therefore, the recount of happenings will overlap into a cohesive whole. Each hold a clue to the puzzle that I will attempt to uncover.

¹¹³ Davies 2008: chapter 10.

The topics are as follows:

- Restructuring habitus and the Belly2Belly socialization.
- Embodiment of intimacy, negotiating somatic consent and co-regulation.
- Belly2Belly; the liminal state and interpretive drifting.

4.1 Restructuring habitus and the Belly2Belly socialization

In the bright lit practice room at the Nest, about early afternoon, shortly after lunch on the last day, the group gathers one last time before the conclusion of the event. During the past week, we have been taught in the practice of B2B, how it works, what its purpose is, its advantages and what it is assumed it can do for people. We have been instructed in clear, schematic detail of how the ritual functions¹¹⁴, and have at this point both been participating and guided in the ritual numerous times, as well as had the opportunity to practice it on other participants.

Throughout the week, the main focus has been centered around breathing. The breath, and breathing in this case, is the main method and ‘tool’ used in the B2B ritual to regulate and calm the nervous system. It is through this breathing that we, the participants, are taught to restructure our habits, and ‘slow down’.¹¹⁵ This slowing down is necessary, according to the overarching practice, for humans to come into greater connection with themselves as they come into their bodies and recognizing the effects that past trauma has on their nervous systems.¹¹⁶

With this as our starting point, we will begin to see the formation of an overarching pattern. If our conditioned state of being reflects a quality of life which keeps us in an unconscious state of traumatic response, our habits will eventually become habitual actions that serve that conditioned state. What we know of habitus from Bourdieu, seen from Mahmood, is that the habitual state is an unconscious programming, taught from our early socialization in the greater general community.¹¹⁷ Self-reflective in nature, the habitus we form become normative to the collective which we participate in, and becomes self-serving to enforce underlying, unconscious habits back to the individuals. The older generation impose their habitus onto their young, and so the merry-go-round goes.

¹¹⁴ Attachments: figure 1.

¹¹⁵ Rådvik 2022: 9.

¹¹⁶ Maclaren 2013: 95–96.

¹¹⁷ Mahmood 2001: 828-830.

As Mahmood points out, seen from Lapidus' perspective, that: “[habitus being] that inner quality developed as a result of outer practice which makes practice a perfect ability of the soul of the actor”¹¹⁸.

It is first when we learn to engage with unconscious pattern through embodied actions that we can uncover hidden habitual responses to traumatic events which we still hold on to. Here, breathing is used as a tool in the B2B ritual to stimulate the body through embodied action to actively attempt to self-regulate our habitual trauma responses in interactions with other human beings. As Rachel puts it: “if traumas happen in relationships, they can only be healed in relationship”¹¹⁹.

Belly2Belly then puts us in a situation where we are encouraged to engage with other human beings in a close, physical nature as to reveal these underlying unconscious patterns that might exist. It is then through the breathing that we are taught to calm ourselves and our habitual responses to frightful or dangerous situations. For most people, closely engaging with others in an intimate setting can be experienced as uncomfortable or outright dangerous due to previous life experiences, or the way that (in the western society) we are not taught to intimately relate in our relations, hence losing the importance of intimacy in our relations.

It is through this understanding as to why the body reacts, how the bodily system reacts, and how to effectively ‘regulate’ its reaction that lays as the foundation for understanding how we are to engage with the underlying habitus and so heal damaging patterns seen from the B2B perspective.

With all of this said, as we will explore further into the text as well, the argument here is that the *quality of safety* which can be induced into the ritual will be definitive for the participants ability to actively engage with unconscious habits and trauma and so heal them.

Socialization in this case is to become inducted into the functions of how these practices work, but also to become a member of a group of people who intentionally seek out to change their habitus through ritualized practices *together*, as to grow and become ‘beings of love’.¹²⁰ It is through this socialization process through which the participants gain the necessary practice which ultimately leads to naturalized and spontaneous action to occur.

As Mahmood notes:

¹¹⁸ Ibid: 839.

¹¹⁹ Rickards 2022: 4.

¹²⁰ Rickards 2022: 8.

In other words, repeated bodily behavior, with the appropriate intention (however simulated in the beginning), leads to the reorientation of one's motivations, desires and emotions until they become a part of one's 'natural' disposition.¹²¹

If these actions conform to the individuals self-experienced goals of what it means to be healed or to continue being 'whole', the individual will then seek to further socialize in the relevant context for the well-being and pleasure it induces.¹²² This ultimately becomes an embodied form of living. What is relevant to the individuals that participate is that the practice makes sense for them, and that it is contributing to their personal, everyday lives.¹²³

After having found our partners for the current practice per the usual way, which involves walking around, making eye-contact and (sometimes) making somatic engagement, I eventually find myself and a co-participant, Sven, on the floor together. We each lay on our own mattress, the mattresses connected thanks to a sheet-cover; a pillow for the neck, and a blanket ready if needed. A soft, meditative song being played at a comfortable level as Rachels voice penetrates through the speakers from her microphone. Her tone is soft, and she invites us to lay down, close our eyes and begin to breath.

At this point, I had already become comfortable engaging with the men in the group. We were 15 participants in total, of which 10 were women and 5 were men (excluding whether someone identifies as non-binary as that was not made explicitly clear by any participant). Coming into the practice, I knew in my heart that I wanted to engage with men, but equally being aware that I would find it challenging to engage intimately (non-sexually) with other men due to the lack of engagement and practice in my everyday life, as well as experienced social norms. Luckily for me, all of the men that I practiced B2B with during the week had their own unique effect on me which ultimately allowed for the type of healing explained earlier to occur. I had, at this point, had life-changing experiences during my week which allowed me to move deeper into the practice with men.

So, when the time had come to lay down and practice with Sven, I had already, in my own understanding, been somewhat socialized into the group, the idea and the practice of B2B. I had, to some extent, already changed parts of my unconscious habitus through active

¹²¹ Mahmood 2001: 843.

¹²² Ibid: 839–845.

¹²³ McGuire 2008: 15–16.

engagement with the vulnerable, intimate, co-regulatory meditation and was continuously breathing in the unique B2B way. This unique way being deep breathing into the belly and letting out a vibrational sound on the way out. It is this technique which is said by Rachel to have the co-regulatory effect; as we sync together, both through repetitive breathing patterns as well in a resonate way through the exhaling sound.¹²⁴ Supposedly, this is what helps stimulate the vagus nerve seen from the B2B perspective .

We can see how this, from Maclaren's point of view, together with touch, does create a sustained relationship for well-being in humans thanks to the physical nature of the practice.¹²⁵

Having had a curious interest in Sven for quite some time, this was the first time we had come together to practice. I was eager to engage, because Sven, being a calm man and father in his 40's, was in my mind (and feeling) a great practice partner as he made me feel safe. It felt as if his calm and understanding nature would allow for me to move closer and dare to meet unconscious reactive patterns in myself. There was still a reluctance to meet and fully engage with men in a way that I would with women, but I decided to press on. As we became guided into the ritual¹²⁶, Rachel invited us to tell each other what we want from this exchange by only using somatic action; no words allowed. We showed each other through bodily movements how each of us would like to spend this time together, and then were prompted into moving closer. Each moment, each movement, seemed to open up the possibility for healing.

And as we moved closer, becoming entwined in touch, embracing each other as close as physically possible, we held each other in an intimate, caring strength. As we began to breathe deeply and resonantly with each other, we descend into the ritual, into the liminal state.¹²⁷

At this point I forgot who I was, where I was, what I was. I was, as seen from Maclaren's point of view, simply a living, breathing element of *another*; another's touch, another's breath, another's embrace.¹²⁸ And as we were guided through the ritual, we exchanged our needs, continuously negotiated our consent through touch and movement, and held each other in the safe embrace of trust. And as we rested in this safe place, it is as if those worries about intimacy with other men simply fade, forgotten in a forlorn past no longer serving me.

And as we became guided out of the ritual, and we became prompted to slowly but surely to let go of the other and move into our own 'sovereign' space on our own matts, Rachel softly prompts an invitation to something, but this time with a twist:

¹²⁴ Rickards 2022: 2.

¹²⁵ Maclaren 2013: 96.

¹²⁶ Attachments: figure 1.

¹²⁷ Bell 2009 :94-102.

¹²⁸ Maclaren 2013: 101.

... And perhaps there might have been something that has arisen inside of you as part of this exchange, something that have moved you, or *perhaps realizing something relating to the research that you are conducting...*¹²⁹

And as a shot of lightning in the midst of a calm sea, I realize in full what had just happened. I open my eyes, sit right up, find and pierce Rachel's eyes as I gesture with my hand that I need to go write. She nods agreeingly and continues the guiding. I run over to my notebook and begin to write.

What I had realized after my engagement with Sven, was that it really does not matter whether you are intimately (non-sexually) engaging with a man or a woman; it is about the *quality of safety*¹³⁰ which you can share with an individual that determines your ability to be close to that individual. It is that safety, the trusting aspect; fundamentally, that the individual I am interacting with will respect my boundaries as I communicate them. That safety is paramount for any meaningful exchange, healing or change to occur during the B2B ritual.

As noted in my field journal:

Equally, it is through the intimate practices that allows [for] the inner movements and turmoil to arise and be taken out into the liminal space, which then reflects onto the quality of safety, which in turn will shape the courage to move deeper into the turmoil; which ultimately allows for healing to take place.¹³¹

Recognizing that my ability to socialize and restructure habitus is mostly centered around my ability to feel safe enough *in order to engage* with the underlying unconscious structure as they arise, marks the start of the socialization process. Once highlighted, it then becomes about consistently practicing and learning what these new values and habits are, and then socializing in an environment which reflects back these habits and values, which in turn will ultimately embody a naturalized state that align with what I experience as my highest need.¹³²

My actions will then reflect this new state of embodied being which will further cement this new habitus, which in turn will act as a self-fulfilling goal as it propels me into my experience of fulfillment of my highest needs. The socialization then becomes a natural act as

¹²⁹ CF. Starco 2022: "Fieldnotes".

¹³⁰ Starco 2022: "Fieldnotes": theory: 2.

¹³¹ Ibid: 3.

¹³² Mahmood 2001: 830–839.

it reaches its completion. Now the habitus reflects back on my being, which in turn furthers the naturalization of socialization, which in this case, helps me to meaningfully engage further in safe connections.

In the case of me and Sven, it was in our shared desire and wish to engage with our own fundamentally experiences of fear, that we could find the resolve to embrace each other. This in turn ultimately allowed me to move beyond my perception of the gender dichotomy and see intimacy for what it can be, namely an embodied experience with the potential to heal and create meaning and well-being in my everyday life.¹³³ Our ability to restructure our habitus through rigorous repetition, as seen through Mahmood, is ultimately, as reflected by Rachel, what gives us the ability to heal and become whole.¹³⁴

4.2 Embodiment of intimacy, negotiating somatic consent and co-regulation

On the first day of the event, as we all gathered in the large practicing room¹³⁵, I felt a certain nervousity mixed with an excitable joy. We had all met briefly in the living room as people dropped in over time. A tense excitement could be felt through the air as this group of 15 individuals had gathered from all over the world to learn how to facilitate the B2B practice. As we were sitting on the floor, Rachel began instructing us about the week, practical things regarding day to day activates, such as lunch times and what be on the schedule, before jumping us straight into a guided B2B session guided by her. After moving through the segment of finding a partner, I eventually ended up with a woman called Tess. A woman in her 40s originally from the UK.

As we sat down on the mattress facing each other, eager to begin the practice, we shared deep looks and broad smiles. I felt a rush of joy as we were guided into intimacy and began the ‘descent’¹³⁶ into the ritual. It did not take long before we were intimately touching, close together in an embrace which intertwined our bodies. It was first after a few minutes that I realized that Rachel had not begun guiding us into the close embrace yet but was slowly weaving the group into it. It was in my perception that there was a yearning for this intimacy,

¹³³ McGuire 2008:128-129, CF Maclaren 2013.

¹³⁴ CF. Mahmood 2001, Rickards 2022: 3.

¹³⁵ Attachments: figure 9.

¹³⁶ Attachments: figure 2.

that it had happened so naturally for us to want the closeness, that our bodies had naturally sought each other out well before the prompt to do so had occurred.

The embodiment of intimacy is an action which each individual participates in. Intimacy in itself is an agreement between two sentient and sensible autonomous bodies that interact through touching.¹³⁷ The intentionality of the human being, the act of being and doing, is what characterizes the fundamental intercorporeity between two touching bodies. It is through the intentional touch that two bodies come together to embody the state of intimacy.

Touch on one hand is not merely an act of engaging physically with another body, it is equal points an act of intention as it is an act of passivity. As Maclaren reflects through Merleau-Ponty, the act of being touched, and the activity of touching are inseparable forms of interpersonal somatic communication.¹³⁸ Consider the story of Montaigne's cat, where you approach a cat and raise your hand in an attempt to pet the cat. The cat in this case, recognizes your intention to pet it, and as your hand comes closer the cat decides to *intentionally* meet your hand with its head and arch its back as you pet it. The question which arises when we reflect on the nature of touch then, is whether you are petting the cat or if the cat is petting you.¹³⁹ The nature of the relationship between the touching element and that which is being touched is dependent on the intentionality of the touching; when you stroke your arm, the definitional boundary between you stroking yourself and you being stroked is dependent on where the intentionality of the stroking begins and ends. The passivity of your arm allows for it to be stroked by your hand, but if your arm were to apply pressure as it was being stroked, both your arm and your hand would be stroking and being stroked.

In the relationship between two sentient and sensible beings, the intentionality of allowing oneself to be passively engaged is equal to the intentionality of the individual who decides to be the active engager.

As Maclaren points out:

What we have is a patting that originates not truly in her [the cat] nor in I, but in-between us, by virtue of the way in which my hand calls out her responsiveness and her responsiveness guides my hand. Touch, then, involves, between the touching and the touched, a 'reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other' ...¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ CF. Maclaren 2013.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid: 100.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Intimacy can then be seen from the lens of reciprocal responsiveness in contextual situations. As Maclaren points out, the nature of touch is dependent on the contextual circumstances of touching. A loving, caressing touch will be received differently depending on the contextual circumstance that you experience with the caresser. If you were to be touched by a trusted lover in a reciprocal setting, the caress would produce “enlivened bodily responses”¹⁴¹, but the same form of touch by a perpetrator or a person whom you share a traumatic experience with would likewise induce negative withdrawal.

In the case for me and Tess, who started off as neutral, but likely positively inclined (due to the nature of our setting), the reciprocal touch came naturally as we engaged intentionally with each other’s bodies.

This brings forth the nature of trust which are enacted through the intentional touch, namely negotiating somatic consent.

As me and Tess, two previously unbeknown individuals facing one another [on the mattresses] in silence, the instructions being clear: we are only allowed to communicate through touch. As the practice began, and there was an invitation to ‘soften’ and find intimacy wherever you feel the most comfortable at this moment¹⁴², an ongoing ‘conversation’ began between Tess’s and my body. This conversation was an ongoing ‘attunement’¹⁴³, a negotiation of what was allowed and what was not. As we began our somatic conversation, we negotiated over and over, through small intricate movements of touch, exactly what we were okay with and not. As

Rachel puts it:

... in this space of attunement, there is a listening and a receptivity, and in that listening and receptivity we are able to, you know, glop together or find meeting points, or discover, like this phrase, that we use a lot, “what wants to happen”, like, there are different energies that want to meet or that has medicine for one another and we can only, uhm, allow that and support that if we are listening and if we are attuned into that, if we are in collaboration and support of that to happen.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Ibid: 97.

¹⁴² Rickards 2022: 13–14.

¹⁴³ Attachments: Belly2Belly template for drop-in sequence.

¹⁴⁴ Rickards 2022: 9–10.

There was an equal part passivity in our negotiation, (the allowing of the other to come close and touch), as there was an active engagement from both sides to learn where the other's boundary was.

As me and Tess learned to trust that the other would respect the other's boundary, a sense of safety arose which ultimately allowed for the caress and closeness to be experienced as something pleasurable rather than something uncomfortable. At the height of our encounter, our negotiation had led us so deeply into each other's embrace that we had embodied each other's touch, and as it were, 'melted into one'.¹⁴⁵

There was still an ongoing negotiation taking place, but the trust that we had developed for each other allowed for a *quality of safety* which furthered our trust, which in turn allowed for a greater boundary of consent to be explored. There was more allowance because there was deeper trust. Even if I, or Tess, moved away, repositioned, or came closer, it ultimately led to a closer intimacy. This closer form of intimacy was only made possible due to the 'embodiment of intimacy' in the first place. The agreed upon term in the incorporeity of touch, that 'I am an autonomous actor in relation to other' (in this case her towards me and me towards her), and that our individual intentionality is what will ultimately lead to our shared embodiment of intimacy, is what allowed for the intimacy to arise in the first place.¹⁴⁶ The negotiating aspect is the engagement which allows for the initial and ongoing trust to take place between two non-verbal engaging creatures. This trust is what deepens the overall safety which in turn allows for a deeper connection and intimacy to occur.

This can be seen equally when we were guided out of the meditation, where we were to let go of each other. As we unwound our embrace, we negotiated our shared embodied touch as to what felt right for our individual intimacy as we proceeded our disengagement. We trusted each other that we would both respect the other's wish to withdraw, and thus 'reinstated' our individual borders as we became "sovereign in our own space"¹⁴⁷, as Rachel puts it. It is a negotiating moving backwards as we attune to each other's movements, only moving towards separation rather than connection, yet still staying in that same consensual connection.¹⁴⁸ I would argue that the negotiation never ends so long as you are engaged with another sensible and sentient being.

¹⁴⁵ Maclaren 2013: 96.

¹⁴⁶ Maclaren 2013: 100.

¹⁴⁷ Attachments: Belly2Belly template for drop-in sequence.

¹⁴⁸ Maclaren 2013: 100.

This all leads us to the final aspect, namely *co-regulation*. Regarding my encounter with Tess, what was so explicit about our embodied intimacy, was that as we engaged with each other, the sense of safety and trust produced helped both of us to calm ourselves into a state of fundamental well-being.¹⁴⁹

According to Maclaren, multiple studies show that the deprivation of touch in the ill, disabled and elderly, who are usually the subject of the least amount of touch due to the way we have structured society, are the people who suffer the most simply because the lack of touch.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, the lack of touch in adolescent children has shown severe results for the survival and growth of the body due to “non-organic failure to thrive”¹⁵¹.

Touch seems thus a fundamental necessity for the psychological and physiological well-being in humans. This state of embodied well-being (a coherence between psychological and physiological wellness) then acts as a catalyst for our shared wellness as touch can help to regulate both emotional and physiological distress.¹⁵² Seen from the B2B perspective, this in result is seen as our ability to regulate ourselves in intense moments of fear and reactive traumatic responses and come back to a regulated (also known as the parasympathetic nervous system) state of being. What co-regulation then constitutes, seen from the Belly2Belly practice, is the state in which two or more individuals come together in an attempt to calm their nervous systems through shared breathing; effectively signaling to the body (vagus nerve) that it is no longer in a threatening environment. Our tangible ability to affect its effect through shared breathing and touch is central to understanding how we, from a B2B perspective, are to co-regulate.¹⁵³

This co-regulation then becomes a mirroring, or as Maclaren terms it: “shadowing”, where we embody the state of being in others through our perception of touch.¹⁵⁴

As Maclaren puts it:

At the age of about 18 months, my daughter clearly enjoyed the experience of me taking her hand and arm and flopping it around like a kind of puppet arm. But much as she enjoyed it, she could not sustain it, for at a certain point, her arm would pick up the movement and start initiating it for itself. That is to say, she could not stick with the passivity, because her arm was never purely passive, because through her arm she

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 2013: 96.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Maclaren 2013: 96–97.

¹⁵³ CF. Porges 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Maclaren 2013: 100.

was already inhabiting and following the movements I was making, because my touching transgressed into her and found its echo or shadow there, and that shadow could equally turn back on me and take over my touching.¹⁵⁵

Mimicking both breathing (which through repeated practice and socialization can become calm and stable) and touch, which induces the effect of embodied well-being, would B2B argue in turn effectively regulate traumatic or stressful responses as seen through the lens of polyvagal theory. The idea being that as we become calm and ‘regulated’ we then impose that state on others, and vice versa.

It is in this regulated state which Buster makes the notion, that we can:

... go from being a human *doing*, to human *being* that truly enacts as then the infinite source of light that comes through us as a: “I have to share, I have to be me! I have to do this!! Where we are just this upwelling of divine creativity.”¹⁵⁶

It is in this ‘regulated’ state which in turn, seen from the B2B perspective, that allows for us to really be, as we were, free from predisposed habitual responses, learned from past traumatic experiences. It is here that we can restructure this response into an embodied coherence which reflects our newfound sense of self. And this embodied knowing of *being*, seen from Busters’ perspective, is not simply a process of thought, but a ‘knowing’ of the body. It is felt and lived, enacted and experienced.¹⁵⁷

As Buster puts it:

“... Because I think people are with a lot of abandonment trauma, a lot of miss-attunement from parents who were just busy working, daycare staff that did not quite know how to meet the child’s need, and so instead of feeling the pain, the kid’s dissociated. So we are living now in a, in a, kind of coping mechanism from actually having been alone with too much pain, having needed that whole that was ripped apart because of society as it is. So the healing is just that unconditional; “I am just here with you as you are, and just breathing”. Another part is just the, the, the breath as in it brings me from being in flight – fight mode to like a: ‘aaaahhhh, I am relaxing, slowing down... we are just here. It is safe... it is where I am...’ in a way also, not for all; but for some of us, it can [help us] begin to dip into our being.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Rådvik 2022: 9.

¹⁵⁷ McGuire 2008: 108–109.

¹⁵⁸ Rådvik 2022: 8–9.

It is then through the experience of co-regulation, seen from the B2B practice, that allows for a ‘unwinding’ of this over-reacted state to take place.

As me and Tess engaged with each other, drawing each other closer through our shared negotiation of consensual boundaries, producing safety and trust, we began to calm ourselves through our embodiment of touch and shared, timed ‘attuned’ breathing.

The essence being here during the B2B practice, that the breathing element was done in synchronization, so as to ‘tune into each other’. It was in my experience that this was an additional element of the embodiment of intimacy. As Rachel notes, that when we hear others breath in a calm and stable manners, our nervous system notices and knows that others are not an immediate threat as opposed to someone who has shallow, nervous or tense breathing.¹⁵⁹

This sense of safety, this alerting to others how our bodies are responding to emotional states of being due to our surrounding, is the essence of co-regulation. To further understand this, it can be viewed from the helpful terms of LaPera’s perspective, where she notes that:

This sense of safety is passed on to others in a process called co-regulation. When others are reassured that you are not a threat, they, too, will feel safe and enter the same social activation mode that sets them at ease. Our energies and states are transferable. We feel better and calmer around certain people because our nervous systems are responding to theirs. The sense of security creates a co-space of comfort. It’s a mutual exchange of connection.¹⁶⁰

The shared intimacy between me and Tess, in adjunction to this synchronized breathing, then supposedly acted as a medium which allowed for a regulatory physiological effect to take place, which in turn reflected back on our emotional state of well-being. This process of socializing into a set structure of practice, to engage with underlying habitus, in an attempt to heal, or reconciling the ‘split’ parts of ourselves’ into a whole, is reflected through the co-regulation practice that is a part of the B2B ritual. The co-regulatory practice is fundamental for understanding how the B2B ritual helps the individual navigate traumatic experience of the past in intimate settings. It is, seen through the B2B perspective, what allows for the healing to occur. As Rachel notes:

And these are the moments that we have the ability, like, if, if trauma happens in relationship, they can only be healed in relationship. So, and it does not have to be healed in that relationship that it was, and sometimes

¹⁵⁹ CF. Starco 2022: “Field notes”.

¹⁶⁰ LePera 2021: 78.

it cannot be, but we can support one another to do healing work for pieces from our past. So, for me the healing, the primary healing that were working with here is relational.¹⁶¹

Co-regulation is then both the mirrored (shadowed) state in which we embody each other through touch and intimacy, as well as the practice of regulating physiological unconscious responses of internal emotional states that mirrors our external engagements. These two are intertwined as they create a feedback loop of self-fulfilling goals of overall well-being.¹⁶² It is equal parts self-regulation, equal parts co-regulation. Their intertwined relationship is not one without the other. This can be seen from Merleau-Ponty through Maclaren, the question being: when you touch, are you touching, or are you being touched? Or perhaps more contextually: As you come together, are you regulating yourself, or are you regulating the other?¹⁶³

4.3 Belly2Belly; The liminal state and interpretive drifting

On the fourth day, as our week was slowly coming to an end, we had gathered once more in the well-lit, comfortable room that we had gotten to know as our space for crying, laughing, dancing, healing, ‘letting go’, and growing. At this point in the event, the overall event had made a shift from us being guided and taught theoretically and somatically through our self-involved experience, and instead moved over into us, the participants, beginning to practice Belly2Belly on each other. A sense of nervousness hung in the air as me and the participants realized that the time had come for the very reason that we were here (except for me initially, although I thoroughly enjoyed learning the practice), namely, to learn how to facilitate the ritual for others.

After a few rounds and a lunch break, the next round of facilitation was to be facilitated for a group of two pairs, 4 people in total. A similar period of preparation began. At this point in the event, I had formed an unconscious habit of going to the restroom prior active engagement. Although me going to the restroom immediately prior was not always the norm, it had at the very least formed an observable pattern. This usually resulted in me coming back just as we were to start, and as a result I was left to practice with whoever was available. It is inconclusive to me if this was because of a sense of nervousness involved with engaging with the practice, resulting in a bodily reaction from my end to ‘empty’, or if it was a defense

¹⁶¹ Rickards 2022: 4.

¹⁶² CF. Maclaren 2013, Porges 2021, LePera 2021: 78–79.

¹⁶³ CF. Maclaren 2013.

mechanism allowing me not having to engage in finding a partner, and simply showing up and engaging.

In this case as I came back to start the practice, out of coincidence, three out of the five men had found each other. As I came back in and saw them, I had a gut feeling to join. As I approached the group, the men at this point not having quite yet figured out who was to practice with whom, I was approached by a man named Great. Great is kind man with a large smile and a soft look to his eyes, originally from Sweden in his early 50's. As he looked at me with curious inquiry, I felt in that moment that I had been chosen for a reason.

Having had been adamant prior to coming to Berlin that I would like to learn to engage more intimately (non-sexually) with men, there was a seeking from my end to have these experiences. I felt strong and courageous and was willing to further explore intimacy with men. I believe this was the case for some of the other men as well, because I could 'feel' the strong urge from the other men to learn that connection too. Euro-American/Western/Western European social norms have undoubtedly cast a complicated shadow on how intimacy is supposed to be and how it should be perceived across sex and gender.

When Great approached, I could recognize my own fear in him, because I felt that same feeling inside myself just a day prior. A longing and a fear to face an unconscious programmed habitus, and an even stronger wish to overcome them and restructure.¹⁶⁴ And, as we have seen previously, intentional engagement and committed and consistent practice is necessary for that change to occur.¹⁶⁵ So I knew at this point that this engagement was not a fluke. It was, possibly, an intentional commitment from Great's side to face something inside himself, and this reflected inside of me that same challenge. Almost a sense of an abstract energetic non-somatic, non-verbal 'shadowing' as Maclaren would have put it.

As we laid down on the mattresses, eyes closed, breathing by ourselves on our backs, I had a sense of abundant joy inside of myself. I had, as I experienced it, been picked as part of a journey that I was intimate with, and I was honored to participate. It reflected in me my own slow-drifting experience of change that had occurred. A shift that was subtle but noticeable. It was if my own belief of my capacity had begun to change as I was continuously engaging in the B2B ritual. As the sense of safety grew over the week, I had become more comfortable, more daring, and more adamant to face my unconscious habits and traumas that were keeping me from becoming 'whole'.

¹⁶⁴ CF. Mahmood 2001.

¹⁶⁵ CF. Maclaren 2013.

As we were prompted by our facilitator to face each other, and as I rolled over to my side, I noticed that Great was not. He was continuing laying on his back breathing. I took this with stride, as I knew that it was only he who could ultimately face that challenge and make the necessary change. I was in an abundant pleasure from just being in this 'space', under these circumstances, at this time.

But the time eventually came when Great, as I see it, mustered the courage to roll over to his side, with eyes still closed about an arm's length apart from me, holding his arms close to his chest. As we were encouraged to engage in touch, I laid out my arm close enough where he would be able to reach it if he wanted to. Some time passed, our facilitator continuing to give us prompts as we were breathing in unison. Eventually, the prompt to open our eyes came. As I opened my eyes and our gaze met, a broad smile was mirrored on both of our faces. We looked intensely into each other's eyes for a while, until the next prompt came to share, verbally or somatically, something of importance, perhaps a need or a feeling.¹⁶⁶ Great began as I looked at him intensively as he said:

G: Usually I do not talk very much, but now I have the need to talk... [Pause] My hands, my hands feel really cold.

I continued to look at him with a smile as he mumbled something incoherent to me. And then he reiterated:

G: My hands feel really cold.

In my calmest voice, still looking into his eyes, I asked:

M: Would you like to warm them in mine?

Great's eyes shot up, and I could see an intense moment of fear in his eyes. He became hesitant for a moment, ambivalent about what to do next. He responded after a short while:

G: That feels really scary.

¹⁶⁶ Attachments: Belly2Belly template for drop-in sequence.

A few moments passed; both of us, as well as the larger room of people induced in the ritual, were continuously breathing. Great closed his eyes, made a grimace, his body then releasing as he made the decision, before finally extending his arms and placing his hands into mine. His cold hands touched mine, and I embraced them with care. An immediate sense of safety and trust came over us as Great faced what seemed to be his final capitulation of fear.

We immediately began to somatically negotiate our consensual borders. The trust we managed to create in this short period of time led us into a very marginal state, where our preconceived notions were to fade away for the benefit of a mutual re-negotiation of what was known to us. What we knew what was allowed and not allowed had seemingly begun to diminish, and a drift in our understanding of what we *could* and *could not* do had begun to move.

One small step of reaching out an arm and touching of hands very shortly led to the big leap of us coming together in an embrace of close intimacy. What was previously ‘allowed’ as an internal experience had shifted into an allowance to follow what felt ‘right’.¹⁶⁷

As we laid in embrace, moving deeper into trust and safety through our ongoing negotiation and attuning to each other’s needs, a sense of what intimacy can be was made present, namely that intimacy between two men is as natural as the intimacy between any two human beings; simply the holding embrace of two individuals longing for connection.

As we were guided out of the ritual, and it eventually came to a close, we looked at each other. An intense sense of joy was present for me, and what was seemingly present for him as well. I had on one end moved deeper into my confidence, challenged previous known stories about myself that I had held on to and opened up to a new form of self-esteemed intimacy. Great on the other hand, seemed to have faced the fear of intimacy with men, and in doing so had potentially opened up for a new quality of safety in intimacy and engagement with men, and perhaps with people overall.

As noted previously, the question (which I find interesting) is whether he had sparked that shift in me, or if I had sparked that shift in him?; or perhaps a recognition from both ends that it was a latent process that brought us together, to mirror (shadow) it in each other, and that the safety of the ‘container’ (the *communitas*) allowed for that recognition which ultimately brought us together.¹⁶⁸ The container in this case being the overall trust invested by the group members into the event, preceded by Rachel, and the power dynamics involved between Rachel as leader and overseer and the participants being led and participating.

¹⁶⁷ Attachment: figure 8.

¹⁶⁸ Maclaren 2013: 100, Rickards 2022: 6.

As Rachel puts it: “People come to be guided to let go of things they cannot face themselves.”¹⁶⁹ A certain relinquish of responsibility is made at the cost of power that is traded for the promise of the healing effect of the practice.

As we observe the B2B ritual, we can come to question how this ‘shift’, this drift in self-understanding actually occurs, seen from the interpretive drift theory. Prior to participating, there might be an idea of what is going to happen during the week: a mix of expectations, desires, worries etcetera. But as the contact with each other is made and with the Embodied Intimacy community who live on site, becoming socialized in their way of thinking and being, learning to breath and become inculcated in the theory and practice, a slow drift in our understanding of ourselves in relation to the practice begin to occur. As we begin to interpretate our surroundings, and the effect the surrounding has on our bodies and on our understanding of certain normative, precognizant preconceptions, we slowly begin to ‘drift’ from one self-understanding towards another. As we begin to learn, that not only are intimate engagements safe, but that they can be negotiated into deeper trust which furthers the feeling of safety, can we begin to experience how these meetings are beneficial to our sense of well-being. As we further begin to drift in our self-understanding, we learn to rationalize why this practice is beneficial, adopt its practices in full, and actively seek to further our engagement with it.¹⁷⁰

In order to further understand this, we’ll have to look at the Belly2Belly ritual a little closer. In contrary position to what some might think constitutes a ritual, ritual merely being the pragmatic part of coming together, performing a (often) rule-governed set of exercises, and then slowly ending the practice to finally come to a full stop and a disbandment of participants; ritual equally constitutes the before, the after and the time spent in-between the next engagement.¹⁷¹ Arguably, it is here that the practiced ritual becomes incorporated into our understanding of how we perceive the world. It molds us through a set of challenges that drifts our understands and interpretations of the world, and as we further socialize in the given context, in this ‘in-between’, we modify our habits and perspective accordingly.¹⁷²

As seen above in the case of me and Great, it helped us shift our conceptual and physical experience of ourselves, but it was the time before, in-between and after that drew our attention to our unconscious patterns (now made conscious through engagement with the ritual), that

¹⁶⁹ Starco 2022: fieldnotes, “sessions”.

¹⁷⁰ Luhmann 1989: chapter 21.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Bell 2009: 95.

ultimately invoked the will to engage and change them; and the slow but steady mustering of courage to face them. It was through the ritual that we got a chance to *intentionally engage* with them, which in turn reinforced the will to further engage with them. This, in turn, as we have seen previously, is what leads to the re-structuring of habitus through intentional engagement with socialization in the contextual group setting.¹⁷³

Seen from the context of B2B, it is through our determination to face challenging inner experiences through intimate touch that we embody the change, which ultimately, as Rachel puts it, helps us heal. The ritual sets the contextual boundaries where facing these challenges are made possible. As me and Great entered into the liminal state through the guidance of the facilitator, the opportunity arose where we were “integrating the split parts of our being back into the wholeness that we innately are”¹⁷⁴, as Rachel puts it. The moment leading up to our touch and ultimately the touching itself, was a drift in our interpretations of what we individually were allowed, and not allowed to do. In choosing to touch, a transcendence of ‘accepted’ unconscious habitual reaction (and self-understanding) had transformed a previous traumatic experience or socialized pattern (that caused the initial fear which held both of us back previously in engaging intimately with men) into a new understanding.

To sum up the B2B practice, it is a shared breathing mediation in which the participant(s) hands over partial power and responsibility to the facilitator through the acceptance that they will be guided into the liminal state in which they get an opportunity to intentionally engage with habitual traumatic responses and inner turmoil. In this transfer of power, there is ultimately a state of surrender which will help the individual face the inner turmoil which is the cause for their reactivity. As the individual surrender partial power over to the facilitator, it represents a token of trust. This surrender of power into the larger ‘container’, held by the facilitator, allows for the participants to ‘descend’¹⁷⁵ into the ritual. If one struggles and resists this surrender, the individual simply cannot ‘drop down’¹⁷⁶.

Once accepted, the participant(s) are invited to ‘let go’ and ‘drop down’ into the ritual where unconscious patterns can be explored in a safe and trusted environment. As Rachel notes: “The safer the space, [the] more traumas can come up”¹⁷⁷.

As the participant(s) are induced into the liminal state, and as the ongoing somatic negotiation is taking place, the B2B ritual moves through the sequence where the participants

¹⁷³ CF. Mahmood 2001.

¹⁷⁴ Rickards 2022: 3.

¹⁷⁵ Attachment 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ Attachment 8.

¹⁷⁷ Starco 2022: “Field notes”: sessions.

get the opportunity to over and over again explore situations that arise both internally and external.¹⁷⁸ The external exploration consisting of the embodiment of intimacy and mirroring of physical and emotional states through co-regulation, which in turn reflects the internal state which leads to internal exploration. This internal exploration in turn is the embodied experience of emotional turmoil which reflects the opportunity to meaningfully engage with said turmoil in a co-regulatory environment in the external world. They are interdependent experiences that shape and form each other.¹⁷⁹ The co-regulatory practice of embodied intimacy and shared breathing is arguably what makes this all possible, seen from the B2B perspective.

When Great and I had traversed the experience of fear, and the initial contact and negotiation had occurred, and we had moved closer into embrace, that is arguably where the ‘magic’ of the ritual (co-regulation) started. Indeed, the initial experience of overcoming the fear or traumatic experience separating the participant from physical connection is one milestone to cross; but the *sustained* change occurs in the embodiment of intimacy, as we co-regulate together. It is not merely about making the change, it about *committing to and practicing*, embodying and ‘living’ that change.¹⁸⁰

As Mahmood notes:

... One should become so accustomed to the act [of praying five times a day] that when one does not pray one feels just as uncomfortable as when one forgets to eat: At this stage, the act of prayer has attained the status of almost a physiological need that is fulfilled without conscious reflection.¹⁸¹

When the barrier had been broken, me and Great swiftly moved deeper into the embodiment of intimacy which in turn sustained the ongoing change that was occurring in our individual drifting self-perceptions. All of this was made possible thanks to the liminal state which in its pre-liminal state had upended pretenses of what was allowed or not, and followed with us moving into the state where this re-negotiation could take place.¹⁸²

As Buster puts it in reflection as to what the liminal state in relation to B2B can be:

That [the concept of liminality] definitely inspired something inside of me [...] But definitely made me... Uhm, become more interested to guide people towards the, the mystery and the, and the... liminal! the like, *where we actually don't know, yet we can feel*. And to lean into that. [like], for me this is, this is where true

¹⁷⁸ Attachment drop-in sequence.

¹⁷⁹ CF. Maclaren 2013.

¹⁸⁰ Mahmood 2001: 839–845.

¹⁸¹ Ibid: 383.

¹⁸² Bell 2009: 94–102.

intimacy, this is where like... this is such beautiful place. That's where I think every... attempt to relate can or, every intimate attempt to relate, I think should just have that in mind, or have that as an aim. because that's where it really come[s] alive, this is where... yeah, *this is where intimacy is a discovery and infused by divine inspiration*. Yeah.¹⁸³

As the B2B ritual progresses, a series of events unfold which acts to further deepen the ritual experience between participant(s) through a variation of interrelating practices before finally reemerging from the 'dropped down' state.¹⁸⁴

Following this reemergence, the participant(s) are guided back to the individual sphere where they eventually re-integrate their experiences alone. Finally, once the ritual has 'ended' the participants(s) are invited to join as a group in a large circle for a 'harvesting' session. This 'harvest' is a sharing circle where we 'reap the rewards' (share) the insights gained through the ritual. The idea is that once shared, it benefits the group as a collective and further help to regulate others, both directly in a shared physical sense as other participant(s) might be dealing with similar experiences, finding comfort in not being alone in the difficulties; as well as indirectly, as the gained insights of one individual might spark ideas or emotional reaction for another.

As Rachel describes it:

"when enough bodies are in that frequency or state together, and when their bodies are touching and when we are in contact in this way, pieces move and healings happen; or wisdom comes in. Like in my experience there are people who are open; we are creating one big organism of healing and we are basically opening to the universe and saying: penetrate us! So we open to the universe, the universe penetrates us, information downloads and things come, but you never know where they are going to land and for who. So pieces drop for different people, but they are really for someone else, or they are really for us as a whole, so part of these harvest circles is around getting that wisdom that is dropping or landing or rising through our bodies or through our shared connection and bringing it to the surface so that we can all be nourished by it."¹⁸⁵

This means that the participants ability and will to meaningfully engage with themselves and the external community will act as the catalyst for meaningful change.

Arguably, this is the signal that concludes the ritual in full. The frame of the ritual, seen from Bateson's perspective, ends here with the culmination of shared experiences as achieved

¹⁸³ Rådsvik 2022: 14–15.

¹⁸⁴ Attachments: figure 1-5.

¹⁸⁵ Rickards 2022: 15.

during the liminal state, shared for the community as a way to actualize the perceived changes and experiences.¹⁸⁶

Great and I both had the desire to overcome something that was stopping us short from healing, in Rachel's terms; and so, what was standing between us and ourselves was the lack of space to do this meaningful engagement. It was through the B2B ritual that this space opened up; that it was held with the trust needed to be able to engage safely with others that ultimately helped us to face our inner turmoil and become partially whole again. It was thanks to the liminal nature of the ritual, and the overall 'container' (communitas) which allowed for the interpretive drift to concurrently form as we were socialized into the context in the before, in-between and after state, which in turn ultimately allowed for this change to occur.

5. Analysis

The fundamental research questions moving into this thesis, as stated before, are as follows:

- What does the ritual process of Belly2Belly look like?
- How do individuals engage with the ritual?

As we have seen presented above, what we have here is a clear pathway to understanding, seen from the Belly2Belly perspective, and in relation to relevant contextual social science, how an individual progress from one state of self-understanding towards another. This change in self-understanding, seen from Rachels perspective, represents a healing process where the individuals are: "Integrating the split parts of our being back into the wholeness that we innately are"¹⁸⁷. We can think of this as a process of creating congruence through intentional engagement with the underlying unconscious habitus that ultimately form our immediate social relations and external experience.¹⁸⁸ In this attempt to reconcile these 'fractured pieces' of our inner experience, which themselves are a result of our immediate socialization in earlier childhood (as well as past experiences), can we begin to, as Buster puts it, start going from a "human *doing* to a human *being*"¹⁸⁹.

¹⁸⁶ Bell 2009: 74.

¹⁸⁷ Rickards 2022: 3.

¹⁸⁸ Mahmood 2001: 837-843.

¹⁸⁹ Rådvik 2022: 8.

As individuals engage with the B2B practice, the individual takes an intentional step into the 'before' which acts as a first step into the drift of self-interpretation which concurrently reflects on the contextual environment.¹⁹⁰ As the individual finally come to engage with the practice, they are faced with obstacles, by virtue of the ritual, which reflects on their inner turmoil, which in turn they are then given an opportunity to face individually as they come together in intimate touch and mirrored breathing in the co-regulative practice.¹⁹¹

There is a fundamental paradox taking place here, namely that the practice itself is the cause for the latent distress that appears as we embody intimacy, whilst it simultaneously is the very same practice which helps, through the co-regulative nature of the ritual, for the healing of integrating separate parts to occur. At one and the same time, the cause for the distress is the very same thing that can help heal it. It is a conundrum only solvable by engaging with the same thing that causes the distress. And by doing so in a ritualized manner, as we have observed above, can there be an opportunity to engage with our pre-conceptualizations through the liminal state.

It allows for a transformation to occur through a successive process of separation from the previous known habitual condition (Great facing his fear and moving through it, and my ability to reach out and stay in emotional safety), a marginal state where a negotiation between what has been known and what is about to be learnt (Great realizing that this is an accepted form of intimacy, and me moving deeper into the confidence to engage meaningfully with other men), and a re-organization into a new state of habitus (Great accepting this new form of intimacy as legitimate and safe, and me deepening my experience of safe engagement with men).¹⁹² This perspective alone allows us to understand the process of change as the individual progress through the ritual.

It is through these ritualized elements which we as individuals can find the ability to begin to change our self-understanding as we begin to drift in our interpretations of ourselves, who we are, and what our beliefs constitutes. It is through the steps outlined in the liminal process, separation (pre-liminal), margin (liminal) and re-organization (post-liminal), that the individual, I argue, gain the opportunity to engage with these underlying structures and the ability to meaningfully change them.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Luhmann 1989: 312–315.

¹⁹¹ Maclaren 2013: 100.

¹⁹² Bell 2009: 94–102.

¹⁹³ Luhmann 1989: chapter 21.

Further, I argue that the quality of safety is paramount for a successful engagement with the liminal state during rituals. By this, I mean that the quality of safety acts as the structure which fundamentally allows for the ritual to be upheld and taken place to begin with. It is akin to Turner's idea regarding structure and anti-structure, where the structure upholds the very notion of a frame which ultimately allows for the breaking down of that very same frame in order for it to be rebuilt *ad infinitum*. It is a cyclical relationship that continuously recreates itself as time passes and individuals in the community grow into different roles, and so subsequently the need for rites of passages (and rituals) to exist in the first place. The quality of safety reflects the overarching community's ability to meaningfully transcend into these different roles as the community holds this 'over-arching container' for the progression of the individual.¹⁹⁴ I argue that this fundamental structure, the quality of safety which uphold the individual, is the reason they *even* get the ability to engage with the liminal to begin with. As we have seen above, it is this quality that allows for the trust needed to further intimacy. Without the known safety of the 'container' (the overall safety produced by the token of trust invested in the facilitator or the *communitas*), the engagement with the liminal state can equally turn out to be disastrous as the engagement with traumatic experiences can cause further distress and psychological incoherence.

It is through the safety produced by the B2B ritual, through the facilitator, the negotiation of somatic consent, the co-regulatory effect of embodied intimacy and shared breathing which effectively allows for the participant to potentially gain substantial benefits in their 'healing' journeys. Equally, the ongoing negotiation of somatic consent is what will further the quality of safety which in turn will lead to a greater embodiment of intimacy. When we learn to negotiate somatically, we gain the skill necessary to deepen trust and allow for an organic intersubjective experience to unfold.

The embodiment of intimacy could be viewed, seen from Maclaren's perspective in relation to the B2B practice, as the fundamental drive behind the meaningful change that constitutes well-being. As we come close and move together in unison, becoming intertwined in interpersonal touch, we can relearn, through persistent practice, what inter-relational boundaries are; how we feel as we interact with them, and change parts of our conditioned behavior that emerge as we do so. This form of close socialization, both during the ritual itself as well as the ongoing intimacy, as embodied living in the 'in-between', that fundamentally allows for the interpretive drift to occur.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Bell 2009: 40.

¹⁹⁵ CF. Maclaren 2013, Luhmann 1989: chapter 21.

This then becomes equal part socialization, equal part interpretive drifting as they act as catalysts for each other.¹⁹⁶ The liminal state acts as the conductor for these two situations to play out as the individual engages with the ritual. The shift in our self-conceptualization is at large a result of both our ability to meaningfully engage with the ritual, as well as our desire to change conditioned habits that no longer support us in our well-being. What the Belly2Belly ritual offer, is the opportunity and ability to intentionally and meaningfully engage with these underlying structures that ultimately results in the aforementioned changes.¹⁹⁷

When rehearsed consistently and continuously socialized, it will, as seen through Mahmood, eventually form an embodied state of well-being which adheres to the highest well-being of the individual. This in turn reflects back on the change in habitus, that in turn enforces the adhered will to continue to engage with the practice as it aligns with the new habitus. It creates a harmonious cycle which reaches equilibrium when the rehearsed practice becomes an embodied state of being.¹⁹⁸

We could then say that the individuals choose to engage with the B2B ritual because of its supposed effects it can have on our conditioned habitus, that it (the ritual) provides an opportunity to do so, and nonetheless an opportunity to do so in a safe and trusted environment.

They engage with it through the outlined aforementioned ritualized way, with its clear and precise intent of embodiment of intimacy through physical touch, paired with a shared and synchronized breathing.

And ultimately, we could argue, that they get a sense of well-being and fulfillment from engaging with the B2B ritual as their self-understanding shift through repeated practice with the ritual. And as they engage with the ritual, they also become socialized in the new context, which reflects back on their unconscious habitus. As they engage with the underlying patterns through the ritual, coupled with the embodiment of intimacy through intercorporeity, they effectively learn to self- and co-regulate their physiological experience which furthers the process of healing as they learn to engage and face the turmoil caused by past traumatic events.¹⁹⁹ These traumatic events, and the habitual coping mechanism created in order to survive these past experience in the persons everyday life, is the centerpiece for engagement in the B2B ritual.

¹⁹⁶ Luhrmann 1989: 315–323.

¹⁹⁷ Mahmood 2021: 838.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid: 830–839.

¹⁹⁹ CF. Maclaren 2013, CF. Mahmood 2001.

Seen from the B2B perspective, the utilization of the polyvagal theory reaffirms this position of co-regulation through mirrored embodied intimacy and so ultimately achieve this sense of well-being.²⁰⁰

The logic of embodied lived religion, as presented by McGuire then still stands firm; that the importance is that "... It needs to make sense in one's everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to 'work', in the sense of accomplishing some desired end 'such as healing or improving one's relationships with a loved one...'”²⁰¹.

Only once embodied and fully lived, can meaningful change truly occur.

6. Conclusion

To start, two new concepts were coined as a result of this fieldwork, *negotiating somatic consent* and *the quality of safety*, which furthers our understanding of how the individual progress in the ritual process as they are faced with autonomous physiological trauma responses.

Further, following the line of progress presented in the above section, we can see a fundamental concept take shape. Namely, *the evolution of well-being* as the individual progress through the myriad of experiences, that when all added up, allows for the movement from one state of being (or self-understanding) to another.

This movement can be represented, as seen from Rachels point of views, as healing, or the integration of 'split' parts of selves caused by traumatic events through early socialization and unforeseeable life events.

The evolution of well-being is then the result of, seen from the Belly2Belly perspective, the embodiment of intimacy, through physical touch and shared breathing, an attempt to co-regulate traumatic responses as we intentionally engage with them. The practice is both the mediator and catalyst for change. The ritual itself, being paradoxical in nature, is both the cause for distress in the present moment, as it taps into past traumas, as well as the catalyst for the change necessary for the distress to eventually cease, both short term and in the long term as this 'healing' takes place.

The practice employs the highly contested polyvagal theory as a theoretical framework to explain how this regulatory function takes place. And although it is contested, it does provide,

²⁰⁰ CF. Porges 2021, CF Maclaren 2013.

²⁰¹ McGuire 2008: 15.

seen from the B2B perspective, a meaningful framework for the individuals who participate in the ritual to understand how this practice does in fact help them overcome the inner challenges that they are faced with from their early socialization and subsequent unconscious habitus.

And as the individual practice, and they embody the experience that the ritual provides, it does in turn start to make sense in their everyday lives as the embodied change start affect their immediate everyday experience.

Arguably, the ritual in this case, utilizing the polyvagal theory, does both. And perhaps it is so that although natural science still has a way to go in understanding how exactly interpersonal human interaction affect the human body, it is then perhaps so that natural science simply has not caught up to the practices in question.

No matter which way you choose to look at it, it appears that the Belly2Belly practice, as I can see from my own meandering experience, does in fact at least provide a framework to meaningfully engage with the inner turmoil of complicated pasts to provide a sort of evolution of well-being as we embody a new state of being.

And perhaps it is so, that when we learn to engage with our traumatic habitual past, we can indeed change both our present experiences and the way we engage in future socialization.

As George Orwell once wrote in *1984*: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."²⁰²

And if we can indeed, through this practice, get an opportunity to do this change, then it is only a matter of time whether this evolution of well-being, this drift in our interpretations of ourselves through the embodiment of intimacy, will in fact occur.

7. Future research

Moving forward, this lays the groundwork for an eventual master's thesis where a further exploration of how embodied intimate practices, seen from a neo-tantric perspective, can help people further understand themselves and how they choose to relate to their environment.

What would be fascinating to explore further, is the theory of intercorporeity and how that would affect the individuals who engage in embodied intimacy practices, and how that might constitute for further integration of these split parts that Rachel refers to as 'healing'. It could be put into a larger contextual framework of psychology and sociology to further

²⁰² <https://www.globalgreyebooks.com/nineteen-eighty-four-ebook.html#downloads> - visited 2023/01/03: 136.

understand how ritualized practices might help individuals reshape their self-identity and help them align more with their own self-interpreted highest sense of well-being.

Furthermore, it would be of interest to look at how this form of socialization that we have seen in the embodiment of intimacy, both during the ritual, as well as in the before, the in-between and the after state, affects the individual's ability to further engage with the perceived turmoil that ultimately keeps them separated from this state of well-being, and how ritual can act as a mediator to further this engagement.

Later on, perhaps for a PhD, it would be fascinating for me to do a collaboration with psychologists, psychiatrists and cognitional scientists in order to further bridge our understanding as to how these ritualized elements affects us to begin with.

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Attachments

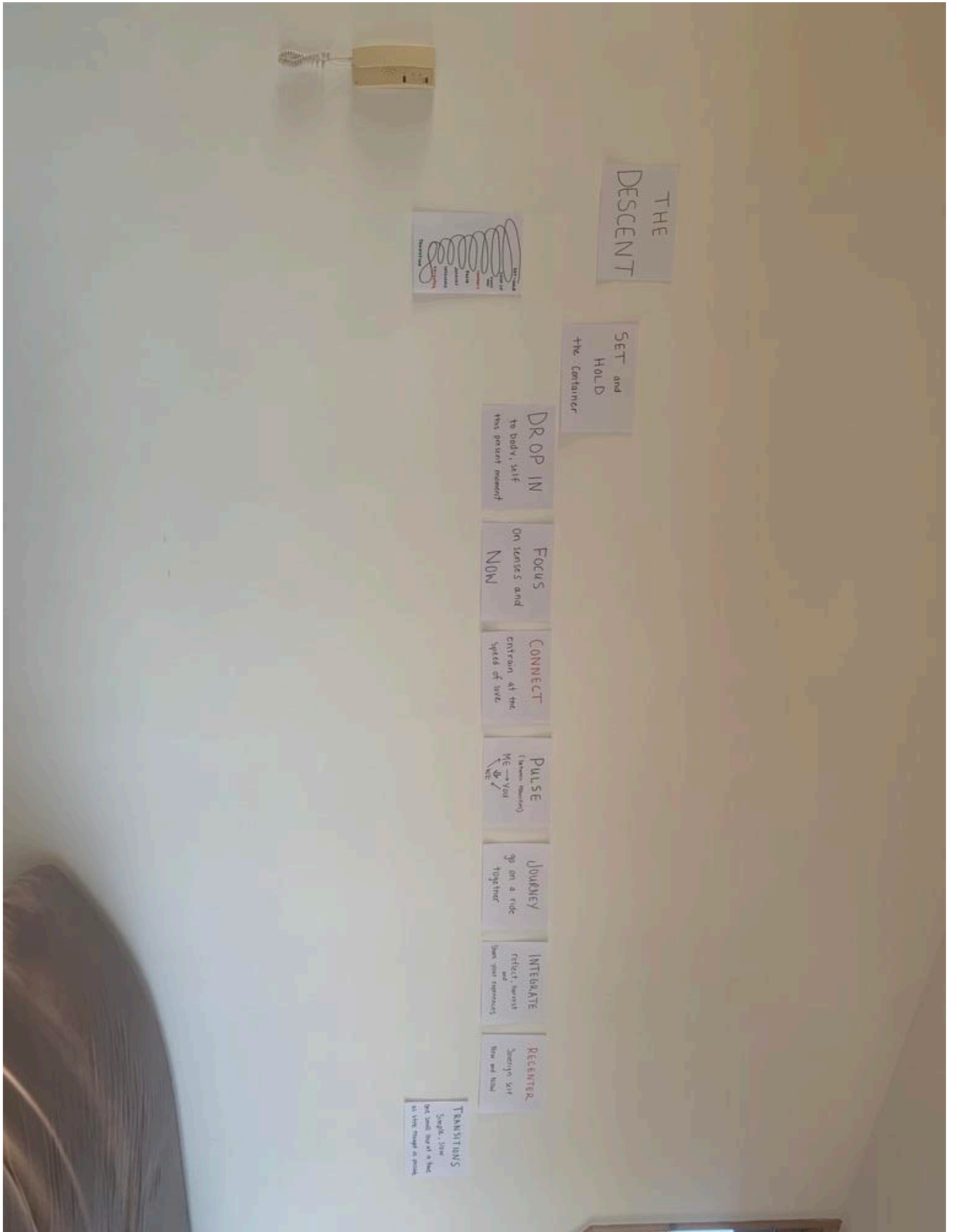


Figure 1

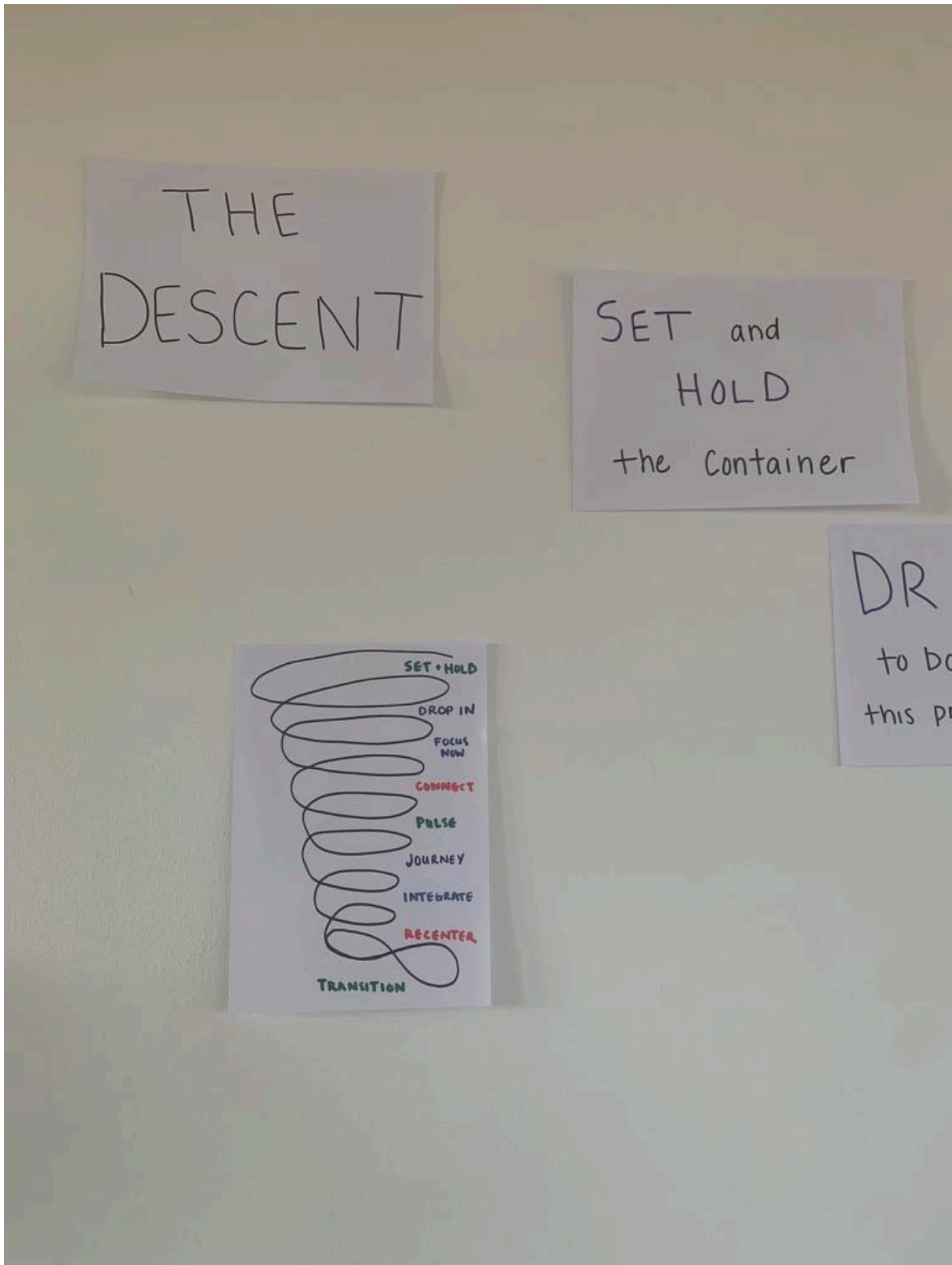


Figure 2

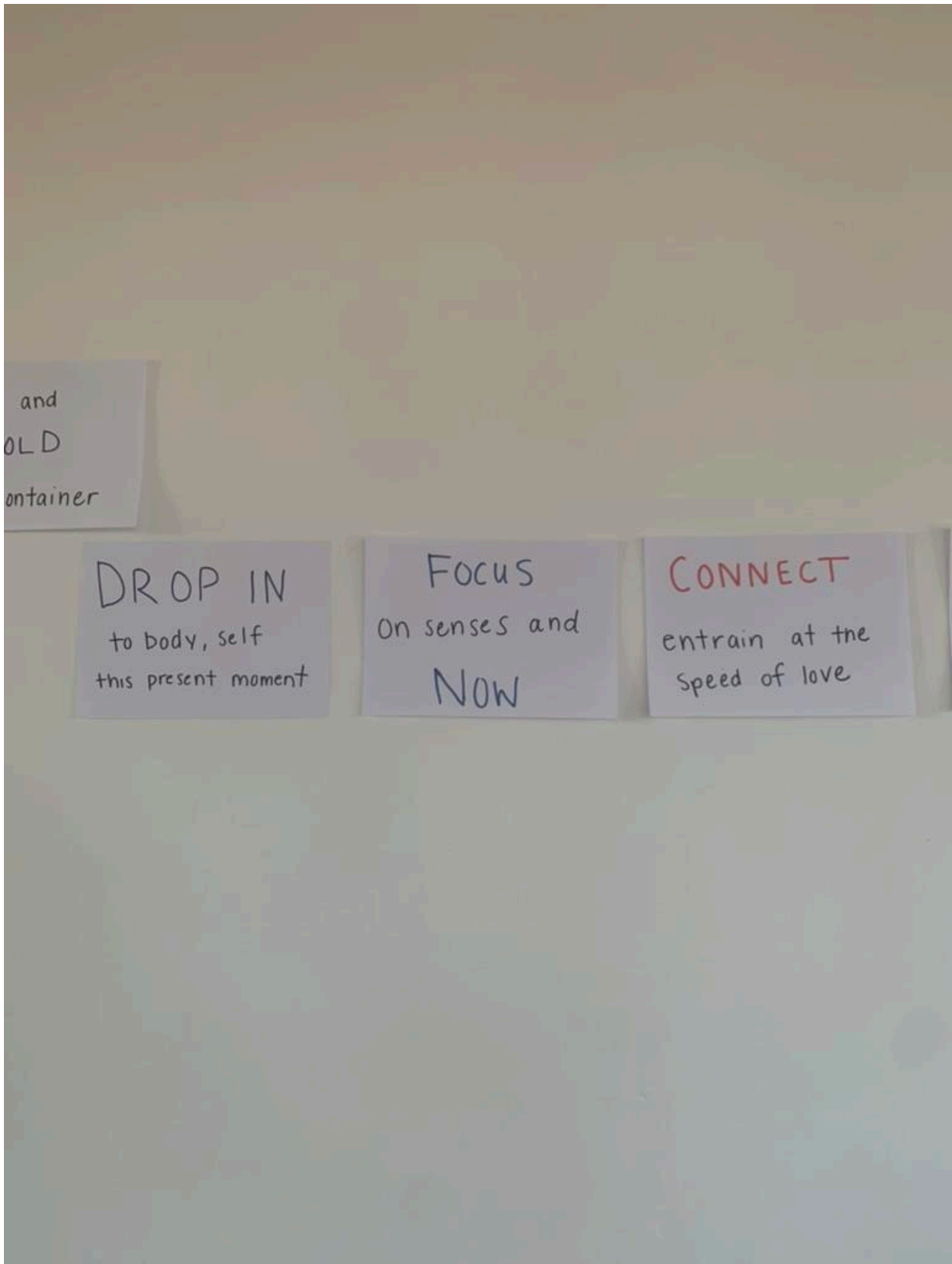


Figure 3

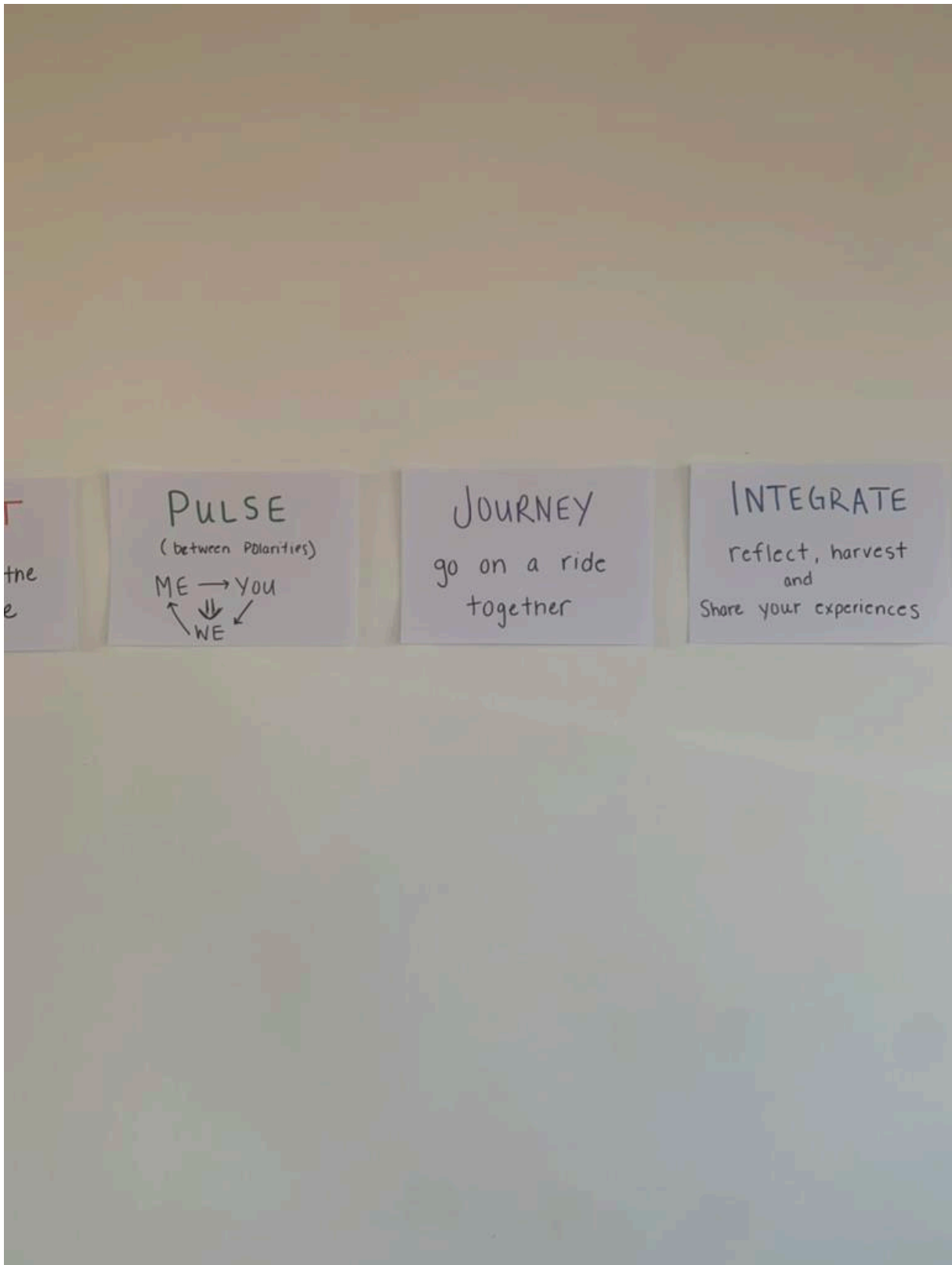


Figure 4

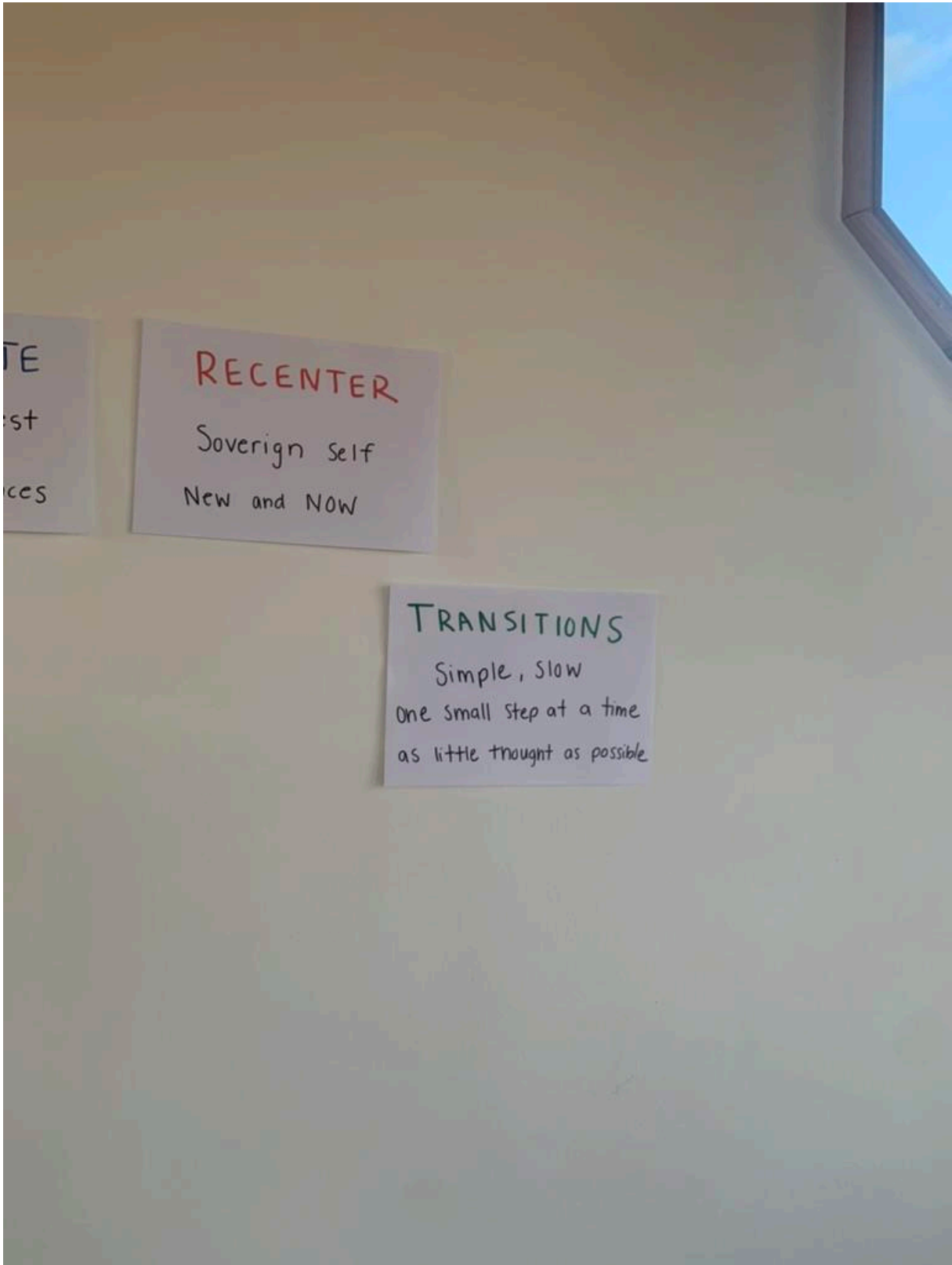


Figure 5

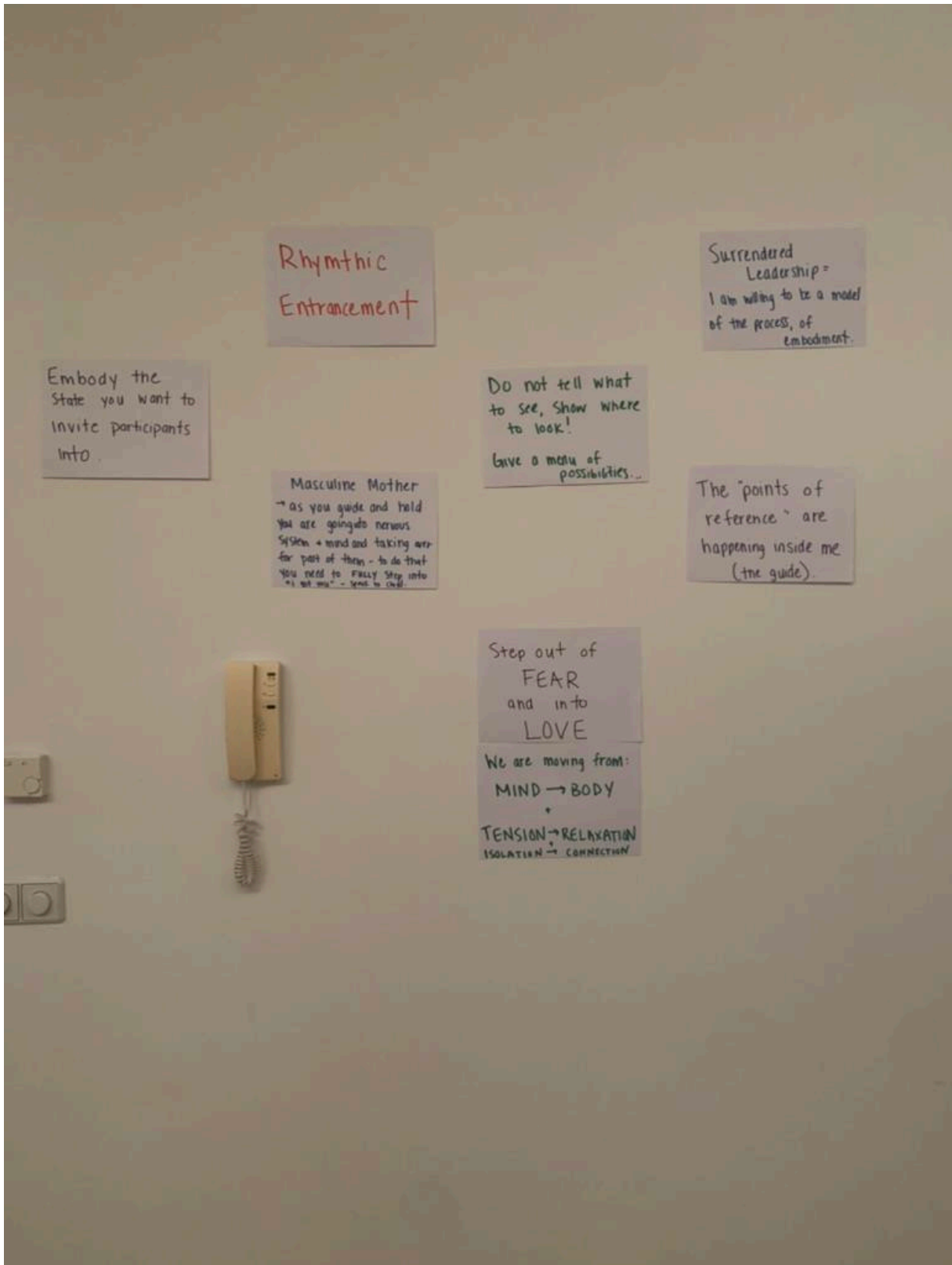


Figure 6

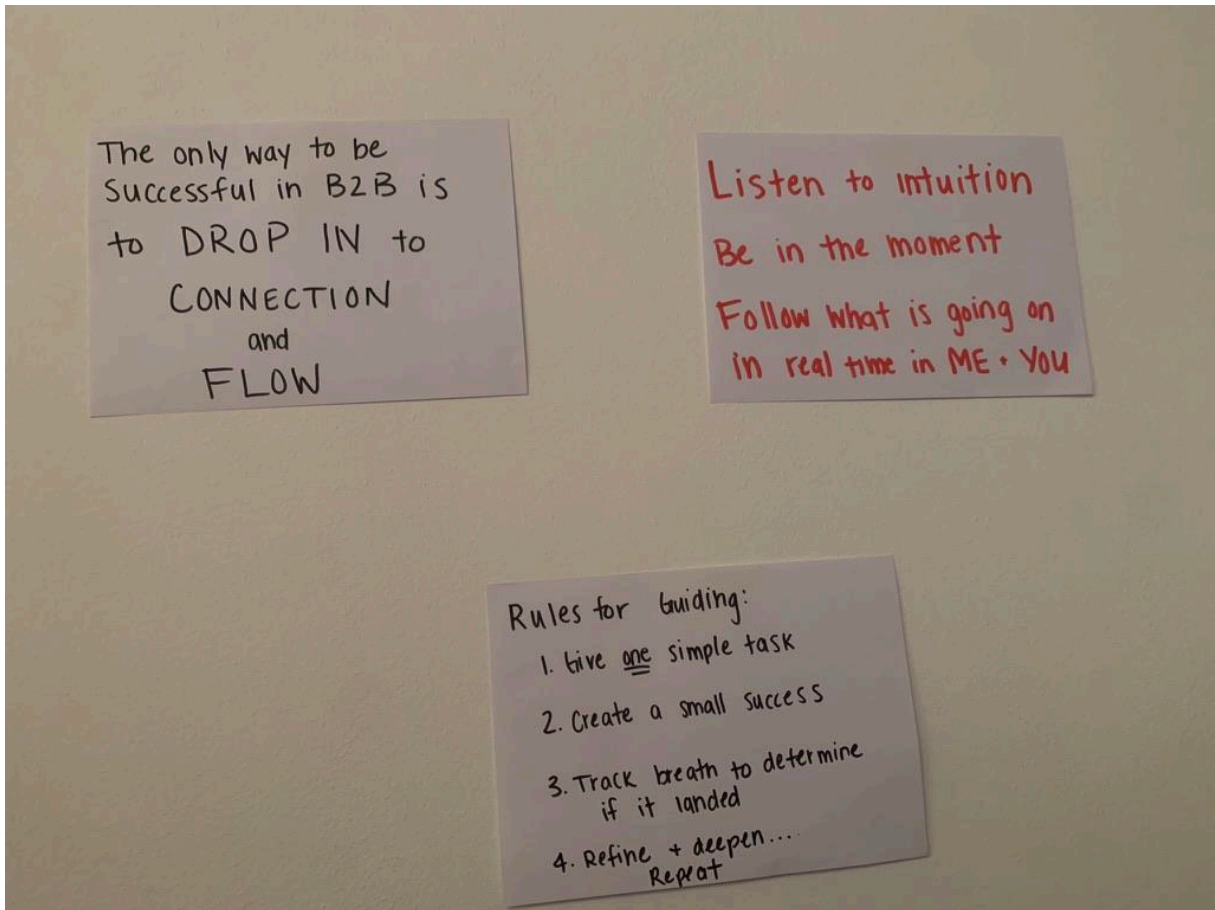


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Belly2Belly template for drop-in sequence

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SOLO PREPARATION

Lie on your back in your own sovereign space
Hands on your own body
Breathe into your heart x3
Breathe into your belly x3
Breathe into your pelvis x3
Fill yourself up with your own breath and loving awareness
Enjoy the sensations/ feelings/ energies in your own body
Repeat, and amplify the sounds on each exhale
*

PARTNER PRACTICE

Now turn toward your partner
Make physical contact
Touch as much or as little is comfortable for you both
Let your bodies adapt to being this close
Breathe into your hearts together x3
Breathe into your bellies together x3
Breathe into your pelvic bowls together x3
Notice what's happening in your own body.
And what's happening in the space between you.
*

PRESENT-MOMENT EXPLORATION

Let's enjoy the sensations/ feelings/ energies of your connection
(Guide them into noticing specific details of those sensations/ feelings/ energies)
(Focus on one particular sense -- touch, hearing, sight – and go deeper)
(Open permission for a spectrum of feelings)
(Notice how energy is moving inside and between bodies)
(Give them space to explore)
*

(Bring them back to the breath)
Let's come back into the rhythm of the breath
Breathe into your hearts x3
Breathe into your bellies x3
Breathe into your pelvic bowl x3
*

SHARING INNER WORLD

Now let's share some of our inner world in words
(Offer simple test to decide who will speak first)
First speaker, share for one minute what you've been noticing about yourself in
this round
I will keep time for you
Go

(After one minute) Return to silence

Notice what's happening for you now

Breathe into your heart

Breathe into your belly

Breathe into your pelvic bowl

Take a minute to integrate this new shared reality of speaking & listening

*

Second speaker, share for one minute what you've been noticing about yourself in this round

(After one minute) Return to silence

Notice what's happening for you now

Breathe into your heart

Breathe into your belly

Breathe into your pelvic bowl

Take a minute to integrate this new shared reality of speaking & listening

*

ENJOYING INTIMATE TOGETHERNESS

Enjoy the connection you've created together

How do you feel closer to yourself?

How do you feel closer to your partner?

Breathe into your heart x3

Breathe into your belly x3

Breathe into your pelvic bowl x3

Now thank your partner with a nonverbal gesture

*

RETURN TO SELF

Gently roll away onto your back, into your own sovereign space.

Put your hands on your chest

Breathe into your heart x3

Hands on your belly

Breathe into your belly x3

Hands on your pelvis

Breathe into your pelvic bowl x3

Notice whatever feelings of love, openness & pleasure may be circulating in your body

They're yours! Claim them.

You're creating them.

Deep breath into your heart

Deep breath into your belly

Deep breath into your pelvis

Let your body stretch & move however it wants to move

Interview guide

Apart from the questions bellow, follow-up questions were asked depending on who the interviewee was and the flow of the conversation.

Buster's interview

- In three sentences, what is Belly2Belly?
- Why do you think people come for these practices?
- What do you think this connection [explored during Belly2Belly] is for people?
- What would you say happens to people when they find that connection?
- What is healing to you?
- How would you say that 'healing' takes form during the B2B practice?
- Would you say that there is a spiritual element to the Belly2Belly [practice]?
- What is embodiment? [seen from the Belly2Belly context]
- What is grounding?

Rachel's interview

- What is embodied intimacy?
- What is connection?
- What is Belly2Belly?
- What would you say happens during a Belly2Belly session?
- What happens in the truth of the moment when two individuals meet?
- What is healing to you?
- What would you say are the most important qualities [for the 'space' to evolve] that arises in the Belly2Belly practice?
- What does 'container' mean?
- What is the 'field'?
- Is there spirituality involved in the Belly2Belly practice?
- What is the 'deep breath'?
- What does it mean to come into the space, what happens during [the engagement with the space], and what does it mean to come out [of the space]?