



The Elusively Obvious: Choice; gender, [dis]ambiguity, social influence, and self-determination



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Section: **Professional Development**

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In *The Elusive Obvious* (Meta Publications, 1981) we, as practitioners, are coached by Moshe on basic principles of the *Feldenkrais Method*[®]. His Introduction focuses on self-propulsion and its centrality to human experience; when we govern our own direction we feel better, less anxious, more human and alive. This self-direction sets us apart from other living organisms. Further, facilitating self-directed movement draws us together in support of one another, which makes for a better society.

Choice

In at least three instances in *The Elusive Obvious*, Moshe emphasizes the importance of free choice as the agent of self-determination.

Free choice means essentially choosing between alternatives. In

thought, we choose one alternative and communicate it, although several other choices may have existed in our thinking before we decided to dress one of them in words. ...In life, [having] no alternative means anxiety and often compulsion." p. 149

When considering lesbian, gay, bi, and trans identities, much ado is given to the nurture vs. nature causation of orientation. Whether we are born with a pre-determined sexuality or if our gender can be correctly assigned at birth, queer people have gender and sexuality choices to make as we mature into adolescence and adulthood. For instance, we must choose whether we will go against society (coming out) or against our nature (being repressed or closeted.)

"When no alternatives are available, we may be well if we are lucky. But if we are not, we feel apprehension, doubt, even anxiety from time to time." pp. 36-37

In *Awareness Through Movement*[®] (*ATM*[®]) lessons, we use the subjective choice Method to facilitate one's discovery of oneself in movement. Subjective choice is central to gender identity as one determines what best suits them; what feels most authentic to himself, herself, or themselves.

"I repeat again, the important issue is that [having] no alternative means [equals] anxiety. Free choice means having at least another way. Free choice is meaningless when we are compelled to adopt the one and only way we know. Free choice means having an alternative mode of action available, so you can then choose the way you want most. To elect not to act is really no choice at all—it is not life." p. 150

Choice and change are particularly linked for many of our transgender friends. The meaning of "trans" is applied to mean either "opposite genders at once" or "changing from one gender to another." If we look at movement as a function of change and recognize that change is choice-driven we see the vital inter-dependence of choice, change, and function.

"When function ceases, only form and structure remain: the being is then dead. Cessation of movement is the end of life itself." p. 14

Where movement means life and lack of movement is not only stagnation,

human actualization.

Language

In the chapter “The Obvious is Elusive” (in *The Elusive Obvious*) Moshe highlights how language often fails. Since the Method taps into our pre-verbal subjective decision-making, we reconcile that by the time we learn language it is either inadequate for expressing our breadth of choices or it restricts them; which results in both communication and choice problems.

“In thought, we choose one alternative and communicate it, although several other choices may have existed in our thinking before we decided to dress one of them in words.” p. 149 (repeated)

Anna Johnson-Chase recalls Moshe saying; “Words are the lowest common denominator between any two people.” Certainly, many words have different meanings to different folks and some words have multiple meanings for the same word.

“Trans,” for instance, is also used as an umbrella term to unify a group of people from many different paths: trans woman, trans man, gender-fluid, androgynous, cross-dresser and many more. Some people in the trans community use the term transgendered rather than transgender to reflect the experience of having aligned one’s body and mind to identify as either male or female; they may have gone through a transition and no longer identify as trans. For others, transgender is used to reflect a state of gender shift or ambiguity and might be used by someone identifying as neither male nor female, but as gender-queer or gender non-conforming. There are many other combinations of identity within the trans community, which are as varied, nuanced, and complex as the community is as a whole.

As an ally, it is important to be open and intentional about language. While some trans people and allies choose between masculine and feminine pronouns, others prefer gender-neutral pronouns to challenge or circumvent the gender binary and its inscribed assumptions about gender presentation and behavior. Some radical allies use gender-neutral pronouns for everyone all the time. If someone’s gender is ambiguous to you and the person is not indicating a pronoun preference, consider using they/them/themself pronouns to avoid “mis-gendering.”

Example: "Let me introduce you to Alex, they are here to see David."

Would you show them to the restroom, have them fill out the paperwork, then show them to room three? Thanks!"

Speaking of restrooms, if you work in an organization where you can effect change, see if you can address inclusive restrooms. Also, you can improve intake forms by asking for preferred gender pronouns and using what is indicated by your client. More on that and other ally tips.

Service

Rachel Naomi Remen had forty-some years of chronic illness with regular clinical procedures, which provoked in her feelings of shame and inadequacy. Below I've summarized her 1999 article "Helping, Fixing, or Serving?"

1. **When we help, we see life as weak.** *A helper sees others as weaker and as needier than themselves. The danger in helping is that we may diminish self-esteem, integrity or even wholeness of the person we are trying to help.*
2. **When we fix, we see life as broken.** *When we fix a person we have perceived them as broken. Fixing and helping create a distance between people; an experience of difference or "othering."*
3. **When we serve, we see life as whole.** *Service is an experience of mystery, surrender and awe. It is what we are responding to and collaborating with in our work. Serving makes us aware of our wholeness and its power.*

Medical practitioners who approached Remen's condition as "helpers" and "fixers" were "othering" her by enacting privilege as a person in a dominant social role (healthy/practitioner) to a socially marginalized person in a subordinated role (disabled/student.) Once Remen experienced someone who addressed her as a whole person, rather than incompletely as a diagnosis or a clinical procedure, she was re-connected to her own "wholeness." To be of service we must relate from the whole to the whole, human to human, equal to equal, individual to individual.

This idea of service is supported in Moshe's uncompromising words in the interview with Will Schutz, quoted below. Although Feldenkrais uses the word "help" in this context I read it as being of service because, as illustrated in his body of work, Feldenkrais considers individuals as neither

to include trans identity that was not yet in the vernacular of his work:



"I do not treat patients. I give lessons to help a person learn about himself or herself [or themselves]. Learning comes by the experience of the manipulation. I do not treat people. I do not cure people, and I do not teach people." pp. 117-118

We know from our work that our clients learn from the Method on their own through the experience of the manipulation in *Functional Integration*[®] (*FI*[®]) lessons, or in the "doing" of an *ATM* lesson. We are not teaching, we are serving and honoring the whole person to move toward their individual self-discovery and self-actualization.

In the Foreword of *The Elusive Obvious* Moshe says:

"I believe what you wish secretly is not in fact wishful thinking, but that we are all able to live the way we want. The main obstacle is ignorance: scientific ignorance, personal ignorance, and cultural ignorance." p. xi

Lesbian, gay, bi, and trans folks are becoming themselves despite cultural ignorance. As practitioners, we need only to connect to our client's wholeness and learn from (versus teach to) them about their identity. Our goal must be to serve them well with what we know in context of the *Feldenkrais Method* and teach ourselves about what we have yet to learn about our ever-changing society.

If you're interested in more basics on this topic, check out The Gender Identity Project's *Transgender Basics*, a twenty-minute educational film on the concepts of gender and transgender people.

How, not Why or What

In *The Elusive Obvious*, Feldenkrais focuses heavily on "how" over "why" or "what" of movement and doing. I believe this ideology can be applied to us in the question of our clients' gender preferences. I've taken the liberty of lining through and [offering alternative language] for this quote in order to

“I believe that we actually limit ourselves by an undue and erroneous emphasis on what is important to society of men at the neglect of how. How each individual can be [served] helped to find [one’s] his uniqueness and become unique in [one’s] his contribution to [oneself] himself and [one’s] his social environment is too often neglected.” p. 99

If a lesbian, gay, bi, or trans person comes to us for work on a pain in their ankle we want to look at “how” they are using their whole structure. By asking us to use gender-neutral pronouns a trans person is telling us as practitioners “how” to address them. Rather than focus on the “why” of sexuality or the “what” of gender, we must remain concerned with “how” to serve them as a human being. They already have or are in process of [re]constructing their identity based on who they are to themselves and how they see themselves in society. We need only remember that through movement our work re-connects people to themselves, which serves one to clarify self-image for oneself.

As with the “how” of movement, we cannot presume what our clients prefer until we listen, observe, and learn from them. The same holds true for the “how” of gender. If we reference only our socialized version of masculinity for female-to-male trans people, or our socialized version of femininity for male-to-female trans people, or our socialized version of androgyny for gender non-conforming people, we are projecting an idea of gender onto them. By trusting someone’s individuality we allow her/him/them the opportunity to trust us as practitioners; it is essential in creating a safe and productive learning environment.

Certainly we draw from our own experience when we serve. For instance, I’ve been a feminist since the 1970s, gay-identified since 1980s, and lesbian-identified since the 1990s. Now, in the 20-teens, I adopted the term “queer” to identify with my community as a whole. Even still, I took specialized training to catch up with the development of community sensibilities and vernacular around gender, gender presentation, and gender identity.

Furthering our knowledge makes us well-rounded practitioners. By allowing for ambiguity, self-discovery, and self-determination in our clients and ourselves, we become better practitioners.

“Learning to foster individuality will make for a society of better individuals.” p. 154

We know that individuality is dependent on choice, movement is an agent of change, life itself relies on self-actualization, and service honors human dignity.

“...recapture freedom of choice to regain human dignity. “ p. 116

Certainly a society of better individuals is a better society because it honors freedom of choice; human agency, and human dignity.



Kate Conroy, GCFP, is based in New York City. Hailing from Portland, Oregon she was introduced to the Method as a youngster; rediscovering the method many years later in New York where she trained. She is a trainer of LGBTQ allyship workshops and

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11/22/2015 4:19:20 PM

Thank you for this thoughtful article Kate! I work primarily in mental health circles, and have been working with trans people in this capacity for a few years. While this kind of conversation is happening among psychotherapists more and more, I rarely hear about it in Feldenkrais circles. Thank you for showing how relevant it is to our work as Feldenkrais Practitioners to give attention and care to how we work with Trans people and others from the queer community.

May Tulin

11/18/2015 10:15:25 PM

Kate, I just want to say thank you for writing this! It is great to see this written about. As a gender expansive person myself, somewhat trans identified, it's great to see this in the Feldy world. Feldenkrais has really helped me feel at home in my body. I hope we can continue these conversations within the Feldenkrais community. As more and more people come out in this millenium, I think Feldies will find themselves working with more and more folks for whom this is a question. It's important to not harm clients with our lack of knowledge.

One note that might be useful for other Feldenkrais practitioners is the idea of a "cis-gender" person. A cis-gender person is someone who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth - so, someone who doctors said was a boy or girl, and who grew up and still identifies that way publicly and internally. The idea may very useful for the practitioners reading your article, most of whom I expect will be "cis." Trans folks like this term because it helps cis-people recognize that they're not the only normal. To contemplate that one's cis gender identity is not a given, and is as subjective and complex and in formation as the gender identity of a trans client, seems very important to me. This might help a cis-gender Feldenkrais practitioner to avoid othering a trans client. Even to contemplate that gender is a factor for all our clients - puberty, relationships, pelvises, chests, breasts, body image - trans folks articulately raise these questions for all of us to consider, and, as you ask, to consider respectfully and in a culturally informed manner.

This brings up another key point from the last 15 years of trans scholarship that is very important to consider in our relationships with a client and is consistent with Feldenkrais pedagogy, but we are all likely to forget it at some points in our practice and so is especially salient with trans clients - the idea of the "expert." For so many decades trans and queer folks have been victims and subjects to the control of medical experts on our sexualities and genders. This control dates from cruel 20th century experiments to doctors who control access to transition-related medical technology. Although I've seen it change just over the last five years, just to be able to transition, many trans people have to come up with a certain narrative about themselves that fits a box so a doctor will prescribe hormones or surgery. The doctors are the ones who tell these trans folks if they're really trans or not! Can you imagine that?! Talk about respect for subjective experience! So for a Feldenkrais practitioner, as you said, it's important to remember that we are only the experts in Feldenkrais, not gender, not culture, and not an individual's identity. You say that well in your article and I just want to connect it specifically to very recent history of trans folks in relationship to the power of the medical system. Thank you again!

Judy Rosen

11/18/2015 8:28:30 AM

It is very great to know this thinking and doing is out there
Thank you Kate and cohorts

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