

Working with the Life Force: Some thoughts on Biodynamic Massage and Body Psychotherapy

By Sue Frazer

Sue Frazer has been a massage practitioner for the last twenty five years. She originally worked in the health and beauty industry and has also trained in Shiatsu, Aromatherapy and Remedial Massage. She has been in private practice working from home and in a complementary health centre for the last fifteen years, and has just completed the third year of the four year Body Psychotherapy training in Cambridge.

Where does Biodynamic Massage become Body Psychotherapy? To begin with it seems to me that at the most fundamental level it is impossible to separate the two. There does not appear to be a clear cut boundary between Biodynamic Massage and Body Psychotherapy, only that which we put in place by necessity for safe practice. I fully appreciate that it is necessary to make this distinction for the client and as a reflection of the differences in depth and length of training. It is vital to be able to encourage yet contain the process and facilitate integration in a way that is safe and useful for the client. A healthy respect for that which we can realistically cope with as therapists, within the limits of our training, is necessary to form that boundary.

When I have talked about writing this with other therapists some have stated their belief that the therapist's intention is central to deciding when Biodynamic Massage becomes Body Psychotherapy. Their understanding is that the distinction comes by intending to work only with physical body rather than the psyche: I believe that it is not as simple as this.

Philosophically, whether we are Biodynamic massage therapists who have completed the required training to practise, or Body Psychotherapists choosing to use massage as a way of working with a client we have certain beliefs in common. The belief most relevant to this question is that of holism or non-duality, that there is no separation between mind and body. What appears to move through all levels of our being, connecting us to others, to the world and to the universe is energy. If we make contact with this energy, the life force in the client, and if conditions are ripe, transformation can occur.

It seems to me that at this point it is irrelevant to ask whether we are practising massage or psychotherapy. Clover Southwell states quite clearly in a talk about the psychotherapeutic force of Biodynamic Massage given at the AGM of the Association of Holistic Biodynamic Massage Therapists in 1995 that she believes that "Biodynamic Massage is a form of psychotherapy". She qualifies this by saying "something is actually shifting and changing in the client". And later "So the client actually becomes a different energetic form and therefore a different psychical form. Biodynamic Massage actually does that. It actually changes the stuff of the client."

It is also important to remember that this holistic view has been a part of ancient traditions for up to 50,000 years. It is central to healing systems such as Acupuncture, Shiatsu, in the Ayurvedic tradition and in eastern psychology. Recently western scientists, in their search into the nature of the universe, are seeing that there is a realm of subtle energy, which interconnects and has an effect on all things. Within the body, scientists working with the fields of neuroscience and psycho-neuroimmunology are finding evidence to demonstrate physiological connections between mind and body. It may not be too long before there is a more widespread acknowledgment of Reich's work and his belief in psychosomatic unity.

Massage

However, in terms of the relationship between Biodynamic Massage and Body Psychotherapy it is apparent that it may be possible with some clients to work effectively with massage alone. Gently bringing the clients' awareness to their bodies is a vital step in the reconnection to the essential self. The therapist being guided by the sounds of psychoperistalsis, being aware of changes in the autonomic nervous system and the completion of the vasomotoric cycle can help the client reconnect to their innate capacity to self heal. We may be well aware of Character structure through our observations of the body. Also we may gain insight into a client's plight by paying attention to the way the client talks and what is said. We are aware of what we are feeling when we are with a client and become curious with regard to what this may tell us about them. Often we just intuitively know. For many clients it is not necessary for any of this to be brought into their consciousness or explored with the therapist for change to occur.

Having said this it is important to recognise that there will be times when it is more useful for the client to have a different experience on the table. If the contract with the client is not for Body Psychotherapy but for massage alone it is vital to discuss the possibilities with the client and assess whether it may be appropriate to change the contract. From this point on it seems that what is important in changing the focus of the massage is the way in which the therapist works with the emerging life force. This needs to be securely rooted in knowledge and understanding, coupled with the client's cooperation and a willingness to work with what may arise.

Psychotherapy

Biodynamic Massage moves more towards becoming Body Psychotherapy if the client needs to reconnect with the past to find a meaning in their experience in the present. This may require more work on a verbal level or with the 'word stream', to guide the client towards a greater understanding. Gill Westland, in a recent article in 'Self and Society' entitled "Personal reflections on developments in Body Psychotherapy", states how important it is to allow meaning to emerge from within and not rushing to offer interpretation, if at all. She writes "The importance of experiencing before naming; and the psychotherapist 'receiving' and being with the experience before prematurely rushing to name and give meaning is central in body psychotherapy". It may however at some stage be important for the therapist to offer the client some theory if this will help the process by making more sense of the experience and encouraging integration.

When during massage we begin to free the energy bound by the body armour, several things will occur as the life force begins to move through the tissues. It is important to be aware of the emerging life force manifesting itself in the slightest changes in the body, breathing or voice. At this point any sign of the arising impulse can be supported and encouraged into expression through the voice or into movement rather than necessarily seeking discharge through psychoperistalsis, which may be more appropriate if the contract is for massage alone.

I would like to include an example from my own practice as a Biodynamic Massage therapist which demonstrates the different ways in which we may guide the process depending on the contract we have with the client. I was working with a client who I have been seeing for just over four years. She has Biodynamic Massage every two weeks. One of the areas that she often is most aware of is her throat coupled with tightness in her neck and jaw. In a more recent session I was aware that she was opening and closing her mouth, wiggling her lower jaw from side to side. Also at times a slight quiver of the chin and faint movement of the lips. I enquired as to what she was feeling in her jaw. She explained that the movement helped to relieve the tension she felt there.

At this point I was aware that if this had been a psychotherapy contract I may have chosen to encourage her to feel more deeply into the movement, to allow the jaw and mouth to move in whatever way they needed to. I could have asked if there were any words or sounds to go with movements which in turn might have brought her closer to any emotion unexpressed and held in this area. We can only speculate as to what would have emerged, the expression of anger moving into hitting or kicking, maybe an awareness of sadness leaking to tears or simply a pleasure in making noises.

Working in this way with the impulse would be classed as Vegetotherapy. Clover talks quite clearly about her belief in the importance of allowing the impulse to move in this way. She states "my belief is that movement arising from stimuli within the client has an even stronger effect than massage. It is 'massage from the inside', and because it comes from inside through a dynamic impulse, it's absolutely spot on what is ripe to change."

It is possible that over time we would gain some insight into what the session had been about, taking us closer to finding meaning in the experience. We may have then used massage in subsequent sessions to help the body digest the remnants of the experience through the psychoperistalsis, using massage techniques that helped to free the energy in the tissues. Hopefully as suggested by the quality and the increase in the sounds this enabled the body to process and digest whatever was energetically held in this area.

Often what are liberated during massage are painful memories of events or feelings from the past. We defend ourselves during painful times by disembodiment or dissociating from the traumatic event. It is important at this stage, as the client reconnects with the feelings associated with the experience, to work with care ensuring the client has sufficient reserves to be in the experience without becoming overwhelmed or retraumatised. It may be helpful to bear in mind the work of Babette Rothschild and other innovators in the field of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder when working with traumatic memories. In my experience several of the strategies Babette teaches can be used very effectively with clients during massage.

Developmental Stages

One point that seems to cause debate within Body Psychotherapy is at what developmental stage is it appropriate to use massage. I am aware that some psychotherapists only consider using massage with a client who may be working with issues arising from difficulties in the early stages of development. Personally, I find this idea limiting. As we are working with the way energy has or hasn't been allowed to move through the client, disruptions at any stage of the developmental process will be manifest in the body in some way. The theory of Character Structure shows us this and has been well documented, originally by Reich and expanded upon by Lowen, Pierrakos and Kurtz.

Clover Southwell describes Gerda Boyesen's belief that we can help the client reconnect to their developmental potential. She equated the streaming or movement of the life force with Freud's idea of the libido and described development in terms of the spread of libido through the body. She goes on to describe four developmental phases, oral, anal phallic and genital-heart and how the libido spreads through the body during each phase.

Armouring is seen as childhood resistance to the spread of libido. Parts of the body that may look thinner or younger may have been starved of libido. Massage that softens the armour or encourages the movement of energy into under developed areas will naturally release the developmental impulse. Clover sums this up beautifully when she says "Think of the seeds in a forgotten packet, they still have the impulse to grow into that certain plant, and they will germinate and develop even years later, when they are given the earth, water and warmth they need. In ourselves too, the developmental potential stays alive, even if at the time it should have developed it got thwarted."

Often when working with Biodynamic massage we are primarily concerned with intrapersonal issues. We focus on what is moving in the client and what they are aware of in their bodies. Massage can move more into the realms of psychotherapy if attention is brought to the interpersonal. It may be that a client responds to our touch in such a way that makes us curious about the relationship and how the client is experiencing us. This may prove very fruitful for exploring whether what is happening is transference and what is the nature of that transference.

There are many Body Psychotherapists who would not use massage if they believed the relationship was transference. Personally I find this difficult to understand as I have not read or heard of any theories that make sense of this way of thinking.

What I am aware of is that when the client agrees to massage and allows me to enter their energetic field I am in a unique and privileged position. I find that my experience of the client and the relationship, real or transference can be heightened. I experience this by a phenomenon Reich called 'Vegetative Identification' or the more commonly used term Somatic Resonance.

At this point I would like to again include part of the article written by Gill Westland for 'Self and Society', as what she says seems to make the most sense to me when considering this question. Gill writes "The interplay between the psychotherapist's somatic resonance - the direct experience of a client bodily - and what is available to the client consciously is central to the therapeutic process. Verbal interpretation of somatic transference does not necessarily resolve it as the process is encoded bodily and is not necessarily at the level of being symbolised in words."

If I interpret this correctly it seems to me that if we dismiss the possibility of working directly with the transference as it manifests in the client's body by using massage, we miss out on a valuable opportunity. It is possible that this may be a very good way of resolving the transference for some clients.

In conclusion I hope it is evident how much I value Biodynamic Massage as a tool in its own right and as an indispensable tool in Body Psychotherapy. I am sure that I shall choose to use massage whenever appropriate in my work as a psychotherapist.