

TOUCH AND ACTION

THE USE OF THE BODY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

By

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Colleagues and fellow workers in the field of human movement. In this conference we are gathered to share what we have learned about the human body and how it can be used to help us live richer and fuller lives. We do not hesitate in believing in the therapeutic value of our work, and our work is accepted, by and large, by the broad therapeutic community. Yet the conservative, traditional psychotherapy establishment in America, and less so in Europe, looks upon the use of the body, - particularly having clients move or be touched in their psychotherapy sessions, as unprofessional, misguided and even dangerous. By contrast, my experience in Holland has been to discover that important segments of the psychotherapy establishment are highly interested in body work and encouraging of its further use.

However, there is this prejudice among the aforementioned segment of conservative, traditional psychotherapists which holds that verbal communication is all that is necessary to bring about psychotherapeutic goals.

The origin of their bias, I believe, includes the Freudian viewpoint that the expression of emotion using the body in psychotherapy would be an example of "acting out" as it would be so concrete, that is, not symbolic, as words are symbolic. I know that the use of movement in psychotherapy is not "acting out" but indeed, "acting in". That is, "acting in" the service of the ego. And I know that the use of body movement can be as symbolically experienced and expressed as words are in psychotherapy sessions.

In this talk, I would like to briefly describe the symbolic use of touch and action in one form of psychotherapy. Further, and more importantly, I would like to put forward and to demonstrate that without the use of body movement and touch in psychotherapy, the client is:

1. Denied access to important memories and feelings that can only be found in the body.
2. Denied the level of experience that results in relief, reduction of bodily tensions, and overall increased feelings of well-being that come from complete emotional expression.
3. Denied the opportunity for kinesthetic, motoric reconstruction and symbolic gratification of the unmet needs of the past, especially including childhood needs.

4. Denied the opportunity to come in contact with and to integrate all the power and potentiality that is locked in the body.

Picture with me what might happen in a traditional therapy that operates on the assumption that past traumatic events have profound consequences on clients' development and on the present condition of their lives. Those therapists work to help bring to the client's consciousness those traumatic events so that the client can then solve the

puzzle of how that history has affected them.

The client has been given the message, "Feel all the impact of those old traumatic events here." But, emotional states have an effect upon the organs and musculature of people - there is a natural tendency for the human organism to process emotions through motoric behavior. The second part of the conservative therapist's message is, "However, in the process of your treatment I will not allow you to move about or to touch me or be touched by me."

While I respect the pitfalls that the conservative therapist is attempting to avoid by excluding action and touch, what a dilemma the client is placed in! He is asked to re-experience old and very painful events but he mustn't move. He can only, from our viewpoint, give partial vent to those feelings and emotions and only express them as far as non- motoric interactions and non-touch will permit. The client is left with the indirectly conveyed idea that this level of expression is not only all that can be achieved in therapy, but is also the best way for him to express those feelings. Interiorly and unconsciously, the client may feel the discomfort of only partially discharged emotions and accept that discomfort as a realistic adjustment to the facts of life. He might then conclude that this level of discomfort is normal and that no other level should be looked for, for there is no other level.

Further, the client may re-enter the world, following a course of this kind of therapy, with the cognitive conviction that his emotions, all of them, are all right in their ideational form, but not so all right in their bodily action and interactively expressed forms. That client might tend to become aversive to strong levels of emotions, because if he did not, he might again feel the body discomfort which results from emotions only partially expressed. Therefore, he might tend to set his emotional thermostat low to avoid the discomfort of higher levels of emotions, no higher than he could achieve in the therapist's office.

Such clients may be left convinced that this level of unpleasure in the body (from partially expressed feelings) is what is included in the cure. Fully comfortable body feelings, which they might remember from their early childhood, would seem to be no longer available to them as adults. They are left somewhat tense and without the kind of pleasure that one somehow feels is the promise of life. If such clients were religiously inclined, they might hope for those good feelings to be found once again in heaven.

You in the audience who use body movement in your practice daily, know what I mean and what I say is certainly not new to you. What might be new to you, as I address from this platform those traditional conservative psychotherapists, is the particular techniques developed by my wife, Diane Boyden Peso and myself in our attempts to bring the full use of the body to psychotherapeutic efforts.

Our field was in expressive movement and twenty three years ago, Diane and I developed what is now known as Pesso System Psychotherapy - PS for short. (For those desiring a fuller explanation and contact with our work I invite you to attend my workshop tomorrow at four o'clock.) We have much in common with our conservative colleagues including the view that past events have profound effects on the development of our characters and our present lives. We, too, assist the client in coming in contact with the impact and meaning of those events. I would like now to tell you about some of the fundamental elements of PS so you can see more clearly how and why we differ.

PS is primarily a group therapy process. It is also used in one to one sessions in an adapted form. In each session, clients individually do what is called a "structure". A structure takes approximately fifty minutes and during that time the client is given the opportunity of working on whatever issue is in the foreground, judged by the energy in their body or what is foremost in their mind. Behind our use of the word energy is the notion that there is an innate drive that pushes people toward self realization. We see in the word energy the seed of that part of the self that is pushing toward the surface in its effort to become itself. We look upon the body as the screen, or the receiving set, upon which this energy shows up.

In searching for this energy, we ask the client, "What are you feeling in your body at this moment?" They then may respond by saying, "I feel tension in my legs." Or, they may say, "My hands are trembling." Or, "There is a tingling sensation around my mouth." Or, "My face is hot." Or give any number of reports on the physical sensations in their bodies.

The next concern we have following the identification and location of the energy is, "What does the energy want to do?" The assumption behind that question is that, if the seeds of the feelings are energy, the flowering is the action which that energy would produce. By the word action, we mean that body movement which would arise from the sensations in the body. Which sensations, by the way, we understand as emotions in their pre-motoric and not necessarily conscious form. In dealing with action, we shift in the view of the body as a screen for information, to the view of the body as a medium or vehicle through which the self is actually expressed. In this endeavor, we ask clients to move their bodies in direct response to the sensations they find at the moment inside. Not in a way to cover up or shake away those sensations, but in a way that would be the most direct expression of what would emerge from those sensations - should they be given total freedom to be acted upon. In that way the body is not used as a mask to cover the true self but is used as the instantaneous expression of the true self. Although the sensations are felt in the here and now of the client, the action that comes out of those sensations may not necessarily relate to the here and now of the session or even the immediate period in the client's life. In other words, the sensations in the body may be residues from parts of the self that have been stored in the body from times long past, or be patterns of feelings that have been conditioned within the body from events long gone by.

The appropriate context for the action is discovered when we ask the client. "To whom is that action directed?" That question brings us to the third word in the structuring sequence - interaction. In PS, we understand that interaction is the natural next step in the becoming of the self. One does not become one's self in a vacuum. One can, and must, become one's true self only in a relationship with a significant other. We believe that all becoming is inherently interactive and all emotional expression has an object in some external figure. So, following the action of the client, we seek, with the client, the appropriate figure who is to be the object of that action in the structure.

Here, the client is free to choose a member of the group to role-play whomever the client has discovered is the object of the action. The role-players in PS are called accommodators and, among the various roles available, they may be negative accommodators, standing in for the negative aspects of the figures they have in mind, or ideal accommodators, symbolic, invented figures, who would provide the kind of relationship that would satisfy the needs of the client which had not been satisfied in that client's past. (We refer here to legitimate developmental needs, not extravagant fantasy wishes.)

In a highly condensed description, the structure frequently produces a "restructuring" of a past event in the client's life. The energy in a client's body is frequently the result of an unfinished processing and integration of an important emotional event and the structure is an opportunity to finally experience and fully express all that was organismically provoked by that situation, but which was impossible to fully experience or express in the original context.

The expression that goes on in a structure is not literal, although physically real, but symbolic. The client knows that whoever is role-playing an aspect of their mother, father, husband, wife, etc., is not really that person, but is a group member who is simply standing in for that fragment of the person being related to.

I say fragment, for if some one is expressing rage or fury to their parent for bad treatment they experienced in the past, it is not toward the entire parent that they feel those feelings, but only the negative aspect of that parent. So, when they symbolically kill, or throw out that parent in the structure, it is not the entire parent that is being so addressed, but only the image of the hated or punishing aspect of that parent.

The accommodator, role-playing that negative figure, responds to the rage as if struck, kicked etc., making sounds of pain while never being actually contacted by the punches or kicks of the client. This type of accommodation permits a full expression of that rage by providing visual input regarding the effect and impact of the client's expression. The negative accommodator does not respond as the actual parent might have, perhaps with retaliation, but gives, in this symbolic structure setting, the gratification and satisfaction to the impulse and wish in the client's body sensations, to be effectively angry.

Following the enactment of all that was pent up in the body in reaction to that past event, the client can construct an Ideal Parent, who, in the structure, will treat the client as they would have wished to be treated in the original event, had such an Ideal Parent been available back then.

The Ideal Parent is not made up of elements of the real parent. The client is instructed to synthesize a totally new figure to parent him in the structure. It would be as if the client had a chance to be born again out of entirely new parents and to symbolically re-do or re-experience his/her childhood, being enabled to fantasize, tactilely, motorically and auditorily, how it might have been.

We do not allow or encourage the client to imagine that it is his original parents who are treating him this way. The original parents never did and the client will never be a small child with them again. But here, in this structure, he can symbolically construct a synthetic memory, while in contact with his child consciousness and image of himself.

It is a testimony to people's ability to respond to symbolic experiences to witness how powerfully those Ideal Parents are reacted to. The client never forgets that he is in a group session, yet he becomes engrossed in the symbolic reconstruction of past events, satisfying whatever was lacking in his developmental needs.

A client may be carried like a child by his Ideal Parents, if support had been lacking, or shielded and protected by them if the client had felt exposed and vulnerable to external threats too early in his life. Or, he may be nurtured and fed like an infant if there had been early oral deficits. Some clients have explored the symbolic experience of being in the womb and reborn if their history had been one of being conceived in a time of stress for the mother - such as during wartime, with her husband absent. Such stressful periods in a mother's life can have a profound effect on the fetus.

Words cannot sufficiently express the way a client looks and sounds when he is going through such symbolic gratifications of basic needs in a structure. His total organism is involved in the experience. The client can absorb the significance and meaning of the Ideal Parent via action, touch, sound and smell. No part of his being is left out of the experience.

That brings us to the fourth important word in the structure process. Following and during the experience, the client is in a position to internalize that new experience via words, symbols and sensations. The PS therapist can assist the client in constructing a new synthetic, symbolic map of his childhood. That new map can later be called forth in contrast and opposition to the existing maps of the world created by his childhood experiences. Those earlier maps are organizers and predictors of how a person will respond to the world in the future. Negative history creates negative maps of the world. Positive history creates positive maps of the world. Synthetic symbolic maps created in structures can be used to offset the effects of earlier maps. When a client, in his present reality reacts to a situation as if it were a realization of an old negative map, he can now be in a position to consciously and unconsciously call forth the images internalized in the structure and react to that reality situation in terms of the new, more positive map. He does not have to simply replicate over and over again, the old conditionings created by the old negative events. His new maps can give him an alternative way of responding and reacting to the events in his life. Put simply, we believe the use of action and touch in a PS structure provides the client with two important benefits. One, it permits the client to discharge all that was locked up in the body in relation to past events. Two, it provides the client with those kinds of bodily felt experiences out of which he can create new maps which allow him to become more his true self.

We are sure that the conservative traditional psychotherapist has similar hopes and goals for his clients. But without the use of touch and action, we believe, they are handicapped in their efforts. With all due respect to the traditional therapeutic establishment and with recognition of the good work that is offered in its name, Diane and I would ask it to reassess its position on the use of touch and action. This is not a call for therapists to over-hastily use touch and action without regard to how, when, or where - those elements must be used as judiciously as words are selected in verbal therapy. The utilization of symbolic touch and action as a system can be taught and learned. This is a call for the conservative traditional psychotherapy establishment to consider including the systematic controlled use of touch and action in the training programs for psychotherapists. The curriculum in the training centers for all psychotherapists should include instruction in how to use, not only words, but also action and touch in the service of their clients.

Fire can be destructive but it can also create. So the fire of touch and action can be harmful - but it too can create. And, like fire used in the preparation of food, touch and action can create as much new satisfaction in psychotherapy as the discovery of cooking with fire created new satisfaction in the enjoyment of food.

Thank you.

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