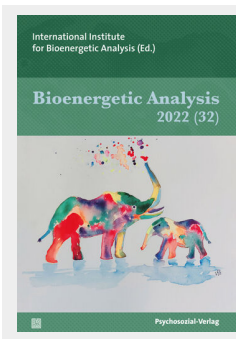


*Louise Fréchette*

## Basic principles, Fundamental Concepts and Values in Bioenergetic Analysis



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## Abstract

The original basic principles, fundamental concepts and values laid out by Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen constitute, to this day, a solid basis upon which we continue to build and expand the theoretical corpus as well as the clinical practices of today's Bioenergetic Analysis.

*Keywords:* organic pulsation, character structure, grounding, authenticity

## Basic Principles, Concepts, Values

The strength of Bioenergetic Analysis first rests in its basic principles, its fundamental concepts, and its values. Wilhelm Reich, and then Alexander Lowen left us with a precious legacy, on which we continue to build.

In *Character Analysis* and *The Function of the Orgasm*, Wilhelm Reich (1933, 1942) laid the foundations of a new type of psychotherapy that took into account the somatic aspect of the person in the psychotherapeutic process. His work led him to elaborate important principles like the antithetical function of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, as well as the functional identity principle, both of which brought a biological, observable dimension to his theory on character analysis.

Lowen (1958, 1976) built on the foundations laid by his mentor, to create the Bioenergetic Analysis approach, by writing about various character types in a first major opus titled *The Language of the Body*. Then, in *Bioenergetics*, he summed up

the basic tenets of Bioenergetic Analysis and offered a synthesis of the character types. Lowen also developed the concept of grounding, a key notion in Bioenergetic Analysis.

Let us now see how these original concepts, basic principles and clinical practices developed by Reich and Lowen constitute to this day a sound basis and a testimony to the strength of Bioenergetic Analysis.

## **Reich's Antithetical Function of the Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous Systems and the Concept of Organic Pulsation**

Reich thought that the strength of an organism lied in its capacity for pulsation: the stronger the pulsation, the stronger the vitality of the organism. He argued that the capacity for pulsation is related to the degree of freedom to which the energy can freely flow from the core to the periphery of the organism. However, because of the challenges of life, this energy flow does not circulate freely as we oscillate between states of expansion and states of contraction. Reich's belief was that if an organism became less defended, less armored through therapeutic work, the amplitude of movement between states of expansion and contraction would increase, thus allowing a stronger organic pulsation and more vitality in the organism.

Reich's concept of the antithetical function of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, although elementary at the time, and since revised in the light of the development of Porges's (2011) Polyvagal theory, still was an attempt at bringing a scientific dimension to the phenomenon of expansion and contraction in the living organism, based of his observation of unicellular organisms like amoebas.

To this day, when we do therapeutic work, we are still mindful of the quality of the pulsation of life we witness in our patients' bodies. We still observe what helps our patients to relax, feel safe, become more expressive, and let more of their true Self come to the surface. Conversely, we also pay attention to the context in which they retract, contract, pull in, freeze, or disconnect, due to a state of fear, or to whatever defensive manoeuvre that has been triggered in the course of the work. Hence, the understanding of the ebb and flow of the energy from the core to the periphery, is still to this day an important component of our therapeutic work.

This organic pulsation principle is not merely an intellectual concept. It rests on scientific, observable phenomena that are now being confirmed by the re-

search in neurobiology, and therefore constitutes a solid building block in our theoretical construct.

## **Reich's Functional Identity Principle**

Another basic principle formulated by Reich can be viewed as a cornerstone in our approach. It is the functional identity principle. This principle states that the function of the bodily tension patterns is identical to that of the defense mechanisms on the psychic level. In other words, the body reflects the inner psychic organization in the form of typical postures or bodily tension patterns.

“Character armorings were now seen to be functionally identical with muscular hypertonia. The concept ‘functional identity’ which I had to introduce, means nothing more than muscular attitudes and character attitudes have the same function in the psychic mechanism. They can replace one another and can be influenced by one another. Basically, they cannot be separated. They are identical in their function” (Reich, 1975, p. 243).

The functional identity principle, which was developed in *The Function of the Orgasm*, several years after Reich had written his opus on *Character Analysis*, was probably one of the most brilliant insights into the relationship between body and psyche, at the time. It was a ground-breaking finding as it opened up new possibilities with regards to a type of clinical practice that took into consideration the observation of tension patterns in a person as a key factor in the understanding of his/her psychic organization. It expanded on and deepened the initial insight Reich had when he first wrote *Character Analysis* while he was still the analyst preoccupied with the analysis of formal resistances, writing the following:

“The way the patient speaks, looks at and greets the analyst, lies on the couch, the inflection of the voice, the degree of conventional politeness which is maintained, etc., are valuable cues in assessing the secret resistances with which the patient counters the basic rule. And once they have been understood, they can be eliminated through interpretation. It is not only *what* the patient says but *how* he says it that has to be interpreted” (Reich, 1976, p. 54).

Here, again, a basic principle like that of functional identity is at the foundation of the therapeutic work we still do to this day. In our practice, we still pay atten-

tion to tension patterns and to how they may reveal typical defensive attitudes. It gives us clues as to how a person had to armor himself/herself in order to survive. The fact that the functional identity principle still guides our intervention is another testimony to the relevance and soundness of this theoretical concept.

## Lowen's Character Types

Like his mentor Reich, Lowen believed in the concept of organic pulsation. He developed Bioenergetic Analysis around the notion of restoring the natural pulsation in the body by directly working with the muscular armor with a triple aim. By softening the bodily tension patterns, he believed this facilitated the access to the person's core feelings, while allowing him to work as well with the ego defenses triggered in the course of the work. Lowen's clinical practice of focusing on softening the muscular armor was designed to open up energy circulation in the body in order to restore the vitality and the expressive capacities of the person.

Lowen was also a strong believer in Reich's functional identity principle. He was a keen observer of his patients and because he had a special talent for body reading, he eventually started to differentiate between various types of tension patterns related to different types of issues, which led him to write about various character types. He eventually developed a chart that defined five character types: the schizoid, the oral, the psychopath, the masochist and the rigid.

It is important, however, to remember that Lowen himself expressed regrets for having developed the character types because he thought therapists tended to "label" their clients. As a matter of fact, when he published *Bioenergetics*, where he presented a synthesis of the main aspects of the character types, he insisted on the importance of "seeing the person" as opposed to trying to fit that person into a type:

"We, bioenergetic therapists do not approach a patient as a character type. We see him as a unique individual whose striving for pleasure is fraught with anxiety against which he has erected certain defenses. Determining the character structure enables us to see his deeper problems and so to help him free himself from the limitation imposed by his past life experience" (Lowen, 1976, p. 137).

Indeed, in his later years, Lowen continued to expressed regrets for having elaborated his character types chart, and he kept emphasizing the importance of "seeing the person" in order to understand the unique way of being of each patient.

Despite Lowen's misgivings about having elaborated the character types, they are still taught to this day, and they have their usefulness. As teachers, we always insist that character types not be used as labels. The useful contribution of the character types to our approach has been to help us better understand that various core issues may arise at various developmental stages, related to a variety of painful experiences (rejection, abandonment, seduction, control, rejection of sexuality) and that these experiences would impact the person in different ways, both somatically and psychically. They constitute important points of reference to help us understand the complexity of a patient's unique existential struggle, as we may observe a combination of issues or layers related to more than one character type in the same person.

To this day, the reference to character types helps us connect what we observe in the bodies of our patients, with what we hear about their personal history as well as their current plight. However, we had to learn how to use the character types in such a way as to refine our ability to "see the person". We also had to expand the original chart to eventually include characterological organizations like the borderline and the narcissist, as well as expand on our understanding of the more primitive structures. Still, all in all, the original character types Lowen has left us constitute a solid basis upon which we continue to build and expand our theoretical concepts and clinical practices as bioenergetic analysts.

## **Lowen's Concept of Grounding**

Although Lowen understood the value of surrendering to one's sexual response and tender feelings, which had been Reich's sole focus in later life, Lowen also believed patients should be helped to own their strength and develop their capacity for self-assertion (aggressive energy). Consequently, Lowen paid attention to the importance of verticality in the therapeutic work. He wanted to make sure that his patients could face the world on their own two feet when they came out of an intense therapeutic session, hence the concept of grounding.

Lowen's concept of grounding is another cornerstone of Bioenergetic Analysis and another strength of our approach. Grounding means finding one's connection to the ground, bringing down the energy to the feet, to the earth. By doing so, a person finds an anchor, settles in his/her center of gravity, not only somatically but psychically as well. By grounding, a person learns to self-regulate, to self-possess his/her inner experience and as well as his/her capacity for self-expression.

“What I do know surely is that the more a person can feel his contact with the ground, the more he can hold his ground, the more charge he can tolerate and the more feeling he can handle ... This makes grounding a prime objective in Bioenergetic work. It implies that the major thrust of the work is downwards. That is to get the person *into* his legs and feet” (Lowen, 1976, p. 196).

As we have experienced in the evolution of Bioenergetic Analysis throughout the years, grounding remains a precious concept as well as a valuable clinical tool to work on self-regulation, especially with issues related to trauma. Hence, grounding remains another important cornerstone in the contemporary practice of Bioenergetic Analysis. It is a solid concept that has proven its value in our clinical practice.

## **Lowen’s Faith in the Body**

The strength of Bioenergetic Analysis also resides in its founder’s unwavering trust in the wisdom of the body and in its potential for healing, a trust he knew how to communicate through his writings and during his workshops. However, the downside of Lowen’s deep conviction that he was correct in his views, resulted in an authoritarian attitude that did not leave much space for confronting his ideas and his practices. Nevertheless, his legacy is still major in terms of the depth of the healing work that is being done in Bioenergetic Analysis.

## **Bioenergetic Analysis and Core Values of Authenticity and Congruence**

Right from the beginning, Lowen insisted on the need for every therapist and trainer to “do their work”, meaning undergoing personal therapy and continuing to work on one’s personal issues even after training was completed. The Bioenergetic Analysis training itself always expected a high degree of personal exposure that revealed vulnerability and authenticity. The many hours of therapy and training we all had to go through forced us to face our own issues and be authentic and true to ourselves as much as possible. In our community, authenticity and congruence are highly valued. We are far from perfect, but at least, as a collective, we have at heart to try to be open and honest with one another and to be aware of our own shadow. This is not always pleasant or easy to do, we do not always live



up to that expectation, but I still believe this is one of our strengths. Not only is it one of our strengths, but it is also what helps us feel connected to one another on a deep level, despite our many differences.

## Trying to Fill in the Gaps Left by Reich and Lowen

As sound as our basic concepts, principles and clinical practices had been, thanks to Reich and Lowen, Bioenergetic Analysis had its limitations, both theoretically and in practice. This is due to the era in which it was developed as well as to the style of its founder. After Lowen stepped down as director of the International Institute, there was a strong need to fill some gaps and to connect to the mainstream of psychotherapy. In the second intervention on this panel, Vincentia Schroeter will address the story of how we continued to evolve.

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