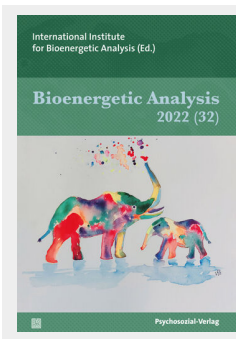


Vincentia Schroeter

Winds of Change



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info@psychosozial-verlag.de

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The Present State of Bioenergetic Analysis

Vincentia Schroeter

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Abstract

This is an edited transcript of one part of a three-person panel presentation for the IIBA Conference: *From Isolation to Connection* (2021). It follows changes in the growth of the organization from the early years and changes in the Bioenergetic curriculum over time.

Keywords: Bioenergetics, attachment, self psychology, trauma, polyvagal

Sociological and Theoretical Issues

Alexander Lowen's development of the theory and technique of Bioenergetics in the late 1950's never became a major mainstream movement in psychology, but it attracted many followers, spreading first in the United States of America and over time across the world. However, there were rocky trails and sometimes potholes on the expansion of Bioenergetics over time.

Some of these issues were sociological and some theoretical. Here is some history of the sociological growing pains of the institute. As the organization blossomed it became necessary for Lowen to create a formal institute that would train and certify Bioenergetic Analysts. The IIBA (International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis) was headed by Lowen and had a board of directors. The force of Lowen's charismatic personality and his precise ability to zero in and read the body inspired his followers. The road flowed like a peaceful river toward the sea of knowledge. But just as a teenage son challenges the authority of his father, when students rose to become trainers, some began to question the master. A few of those "sons" criticized his methods or wanted to add to them. Lowen was an authoritarian figure and had difficulty allowing any new ideas into his tent. Some of those trainers were

ostracized. In this patriarchal time, most of the trainers in leadership positions were men, and women had to jump through more hoops than the men to prove they were competent Bioenergetic therapists. In the late 1980's a schism formed over what was called the East Coast style (more orthodox, "hard Bioenergetics") and the West Coast (more relational based "soft Bioenergetics") style. Some of these new ideas had threatened to, as one trainer said, "throw the body out with the bathwater." In 1990, Lowen put his foot down to protest these "softer" methods stating that, "people are not doing enough bodywork". He created a "back to basics" curriculum insisting all trainers and trainees adhere to a strict regimen. People either left or conformed. In 1996, Lowen, who preferred performing Bioenergetic work over running a big organization, stepped down as executive director.

In 1999 some trainers from around the world came together to revamp the curriculum to include both the traditional tenets and add some modern additions that trainers felt enhanced the therapeutic dynamic. I remember being a new international faculty member and spending four days in breakout groups in New York discussing these issues. A new curriculum was written, spearheaded by Violane deClerk that satisfied all parties. A healing of the earlier East-West split spread through the organization. What were some of these movements that made their way into the tent of Bioenergetic teaching?

Influence of New Movements

Bioenergetics was created to work with neurotic types and was based on a one-person model, meaning the therapist is an authority who knows what is best for the client. In the book *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*, Lowen reports that he was working with a bragging client and "I became annoyed and pointed out his narcissism" (Lowen, 1983, p. 48). The two then butted heads and the client got more entrenched in defensiveness. To me this is an example of a failed intervention.

As a therapist I have also come upon times when my interventions were not successful, or I felt I did not have the right resonance with my client. I would rush off to Bioenergetic supervision. Sometimes the answer was not there. These are the times a therapist lifts the skirt at the floor of their philosophical tent and peeks outside to see if some other method will help. What other winds were sweeping through the clinical psychology field? I perked up my ears to hear what new books therapists were reading, new classes they were taking, and I listened to how these other methods enhanced their work.

I will do a brief review of the major movements that were brought inside that tent and got incorporated into the orthodoxy of Bioenergetic curriculum.

Attachment theory

The work of John Bowlby (1988) and Mary Ainsworth (1978) looked at infant development styles and gave therapists a new lens as to what therapeutic stance to take with their adult clients based on this dynamic. The early attachment work was championed by Bioenergetic trainers David Campbell and June McDonough in Scotland and later Guy Tonella in France. This work dovetailed well with Bioenergetic character types and added the lens of looking at secure and insecure attachment styles. With attachment the nuances of the therapeutic dyad are elaborated and enhanced. The therapist as authority figure loses prominence as the therapist examines the transference and countertransference issues related to attachment styles. For example, a schizoid client may exhibit a dismissive adult relational style, which is based on an early avoidant attachment. This type of client needs help to feel safe by the therapist, who creates a trusting environment before introducing any somatic work.

Self-Psychology

I watched a Bioenergetic trainer do a demonstration with a psychopath trying to make the client reach. The client's hands shook, he appeared jarred and looked dissociated. The therapist missed that the client was complying but was not present. The work was not successful. As a group we wondered why and discussed the "conflict versus deficit" model. When do you break down armor and when do you fill a hole in the client's psyche? Which clients need more relational support in order to do successful somatic work? Any client without a strong sense of self, particularly those with primarily pre-oedipal structures needed to be examined. We looked first to Lowen (1983). He had placed borderline pathology on the narcissistic continuum, but he never wrote a book about borderlines. This left a pothole. Heinz Kohut (1984) specialized in working with primitively organized patients and his model of the therapist becoming a self-object that the patient can use to help themselves develop a stronger self was a pivotal addition to the field. I studied self-psychology at a contemporary psychoanalytic society and gained skills at working with deeper pathologies, which enhanced my work. The work

around understanding mutual regulation of affect was enhanced by Allan Schore (2003). A client who becomes “grounded” in relationship with the therapist, often becomes receptive to finding that ground in their own bodywork.

Trauma work

Neuropsychobiology began to make a big imprint on the field of clinical psychology in the 2000’s, both with the research and recognition of PTSD, and the methods of Peter Levine (2010), Bessel Van der Kolk (2015), and Gabor Mate (2012). These spawned new ways to work with acute and developmental trauma. Trauma crosses all character types, so a Bioenergetic therapist could take character into consideration and work with the newer understanding of the brain in terms of trauma and healing vortexes, dissociative states and up and down regulating. However, many in the trauma field are against catharsis, which is a major tenet in Bioenergetics. They consider catharsis to be flooding and not healing. See Bioenergetic Analyst Angela Klopstech’s (2005) excellent writing defending catharsis, which includes Bioenergetic methods to work with frozen affect or dysregulation.

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011) became popular in 2015 with a new understanding about the role of the vagus nerve in regulating our physical and emotional states. Polyvagal theory takes us further into the body and brain unity that Reich and Lowen touted in the 1930’s. With MRI, fMRI and PET scans we can now see what lights up in the brain and learn more about stress, thinking and feeling. We can address the nervous system in a more sophisticated way in our Bioenergetic work. Some of these physiological hooks also provide scientific validation for Bioenergetic Analysis. Cognitive-behavioral schools have always been a top-down method of treatment. Polyvagal theory broadens the appeal of working primarily from a “bottom-up” approach, which we do in Bioenergetics. Helen Resneck-Sannes (2002), Jörg Clauer (2011), Margit Koemeda (2012) and Vincentia Schroeter (2016) have published articles exploring the marriage of Bioenergetics and newer developments in neurobiology.

There have been other movements in the field over the past fifty years and you may have training in some that meld beautifully with your somatic Bioenergetic work. As an institute we have been flexible enough to fold in some of these new-

er developments in ways that improve our work with patients. The basic tenets of energy dynamics and character are the trunk of our tree. And like two arms reaching toward the sky from a Bioenergetic bow, may we continue to grow new branches and leaves that are fed by the strength of that trunk.

There have been modern voices that have turned the heads of Bioenergetic Analysts and made us pay attention in a new way to some of our beliefs, examine our therapeutic stances and shift our views when it comes to inclusion of various populations. Susan Kanor will now present material on this current environment in the Bioenergetic landscape.

Postscript

This presentation was prepared as part of a three-person panel for the IIBA Conference (2021) *From Isolation to Connection*. The Panel theme is “The Strengths of Bioenergetics.”

For a more comprehensive exploration of the changes since the beginning of Bioenergetics, the reader is referred to Guy Tonella’s 2008 article cited below on “Paradigms for Bioenergetic Analysis at the Dawn of the 21st Century”. Tonella elaborates the development of new paradigms in psychology, placing Bioenergetics within a larger context historically and theoretically. For an update of how Bioenergetic curriculum is changing, read “Self-Regulation and Psychodynamics in Bioenergetic Analysis” by Jens Tasche (2021). The author proposes ten theses containing theoretical considerations for current post graduate Bioenergetic curriculum in Poland. This type of curriculum is consistent with the folding of modern paradigms into the basic recipe of teaching Bioenergetic Analysis.

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About the Author

Vincentia Schroeter is a member of the international faculty of the IIBA, member of SCI-BA, and editor of the IIBA journal (2008–2018). She is a co-author with Barbara Thomson of *Bend Into Shape, Techniques for Bioenergetic Therapists* (2011); author of *Communication Breakthrough: How Brain Science and Listening to Body Cues Can Transform Your Relationships* (2018); and author of *Tilt: Seeking Balance in Troubled Times* (2021).

vincentiaschroeterphd.com