ARTICLE · 2004

How Body Psychotherapy Can Help Apply Insights from Neuroscience

Michael Soth

Body psychotherapy has been working with the body in therapy for 80 years — long before neuroscience began mapping the bodymind connections which body therapists had always intuited. This article explores how body psychotherapy can help practitioners from all orientations apply neuroscientific insights to clinical practice, without falling into the trap of a new objectifying reductionism.

KEY THEMES

— 80 years of body psychotherapy as implicit neuroscience
— Attachment theory and somatic affect regulation
— Mirror neurons and embodied countertransference
— The danger of a new neuro-objectification
— Body psychotherapy's contribution to trauma work

Body Psychotherapy as Implicit Neuroscience

Body psychotherapy has been working with the body in therapy for over 80 years, going back to Wilhelm Reich's work in the 1930s. Long before neuroscience began articulating the somatic foundations of emotion, attachment and selfhood, body therapists had been working empirically with these dimensions of human experience.

What neuroscience now confirms — that emotional interpersonal processes become internalised and embodied as body/mind processes; that the attachment relationship affects physiological and anatomical development; that the way the infant is held and related to becomes the way the person's mind is capable of holding and relating to their feelings — these are not new discoveries for body psychotherapists. They are the implicit assumptions of our work, now given biological substrata.

The discovery of mirror neurons has far-reaching implications for human communication and specifically therapeutic interaction. Research shows that when we observe or even hear about someone else performing physical actions, dedicated neurons in our brain fire in response, creating a vicarious sense of embodied action in ourselves and allowing us to empathically recognise the other's internal state. This lends support to the notions of 'energetic perception' and 'embodied countertransference' which body psychotherapists have long relied upon.

The Danger of Neuro-Objectification

However, the neuroscientific turn in psychotherapy brings its own risks. There is a temptation to use neuroscientific findings to justify a new form of body-oriented objectification — directing clients to regulate their nervous systems through breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and body-awareness techniques in a way which bypasses the relational complexity of the therapeutic encounter.

What is being missed in many attempts to 'apply neuroscience' to therapeutic practice is the relational dimension: the fact that the therapist's own nervous system is as much a part of the healing environment as any technique. The therapist's capacity for bodymind attunement — their own embodied presence — is not a technique but a quality of being which is itself a form of regulation, modelling, and invitation.

A therapist's own lack of embodiment within the therapeutic position far outweighs in its effect any positive benefits which derive from the use of body-oriented techniques. This is the crucial insight which body psychotherapy's 80-year history can offer to the neuroscience-informed practitioner.

Practical Contributions

What can body psychotherapy specifically offer the practitioner wanting to apply neuroscientific insights? Several things which are not available from neuroscience texts alone: a clinical phenomenology of the bodymind spectrum in both client and therapist; a tradition of working with spontaneous bodymind process rather than directing or managing it; an understanding of the somatic dimensions of transference and countertransference; and a developmental map of how wounding gets internalised as specific bodymind patterns.

The concept of 'somatic resonance' — the therapist's involuntary bodily responses to the client as a form of information — is perhaps the most clinically significant contribution. Rather than teaching clients to regulate their nervous systems through technique, the body psychotherapy tradition at its most sophisticated teaches therapists to use their own bodymind attunement as both information and model.

The goal is not to graft the body onto established analytic or humanistic practice as an additional avenue. That remains at the level of holism. The integral step — which is also the neuroscientific step — is to recognise that the body is not an add-on but the ground from which subjectivity, relationship, and transformation arise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

— Damasio, A.R. (1994) Descartes' Error. New York: Putnam

— Schore, A.N. (1994) Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self. Erlbaum

— Gallese, V. (2003) The roots of empathy. Psychopathology 36

— Porges, S. (2005) The polyvagal theory. Biological Psychology 74

— Soth, M. (2005) Embodied countertransference. In N. Totton (ed.) New Dimensions in Body Psychotherapy. OUP

— Boadella, D. (1987) Lifestreams. London: Routledge Kegan Paul

Published at soth.co.uk · © 2004 Michael Soth · All rights reserved