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The Use of Body Psychotherapy in the Context of Group Therapy

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An exploration of what happens when body psychotherapy principles meet the complexity of group process — addressing the particular challenges and opportunities of embodied attunement, somatic resonance and parallel process in a group context, and the ways in which the 'shared intersubjective manifold' of the group becomes a vehicle for therapeutic transformation.

KEY THEMES

— Body psychotherapy in the group context

— Somatic resonance and the 'shared intersubjective manifold'

— Mirror neurons and group attunement

— Parallel process in groups

— The therapist's embodied presence in group work

The Group as Bodymind System

When body psychotherapy principles are applied in a group context, the complexity multiplies. The group is not simply the sum of its individual members' bodymind processes — it is a system with its own emergent properties, its own characteristic patterns of resonance and dissonance, its own collective body/mind.

The discovery of mirror neurons helps us understand something body therapists have long observed: that groups develop collective somatic states, that one person's bodymind experience can resonate through the whole room without explicit verbal communication. The concept of entrainment — the tendency of rhythmic systems to synchronise — suggests that groups develop shared physiological rhythms which both reflect and generate shared emotional states.

This is what Vittorio Gallese has called the 'shared intersubjective manifold' or 'shared manifold hypothesis': we are constantly mapping, representing and experiencing subliminally each other's internal states through bodies which we presume to be individual but which energetically and experientially are far from separate and neatly delineated.

Somatic Resonance and Embodied Attunement

Our understanding of the subtle messages constituting embodied affect attunement can be deepened through the neuroscientific concepts of entrainment and mirror neurons. Stephen Porges' work on the vagus nerve as a hardwired 'Social Engagement System' points out that social bonding depends on interrupting the fight-flight-freeze reflex triggered in mammals by close proximity, and substituting a capacity for relaxed presence — enabling interpersonal contact to be experienced as soothing and nourishing.

In the group, this means that the therapist's own bodymind regulation — their capacity to remain present and grounded in their own embodied aliveness — is not just personally important but functionally significant for the whole group system. The therapist's embodied presence is a form of group regulation: it creates the somatic conditions within which other members can risk greater aliveness.

Body psychotherapy's tradition of working with energetic perception and somatic countertransference is directly applicable here — but with the complexity that in a group the therapist is receiving the energetic field of many people simultaneously, and needs to be able to distinguish different threads of somatic information without being overwhelmed.

Parallel Process in Groups

The concept of parallel process — developed in supervision as the way the client's wound gets carried from the therapeutic relationship into the supervisory relationship — applies equally in group contexts. The group's collective wound, its characteristic way of managing vulnerability and relating to authority, will be replicated in the relationship between the group and its therapist(s), in the relationship between group members, and in the therapist's internal experience.

Working with parallel process in a group requires the same quality of attention as in individual work — holding awareness of the multiple levels at which the wounding dynamic is being enacted simultaneously — but applied with even greater complexity and fluidity. The therapist must be able to track individual members' bodymind states, the developing group process, their own somatic countertransference, and the overall system of the group as a whole.

The greatest gift the body psychotherapy tradition can offer to group work is precisely this capacity for multi-level somatic attention — for holding a bodymind phenomenology of the whole group system in awareness, without reducing it to any single level or collapsing the complexity into premature interpretation.

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