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Re-formulating the Notion of the Body/Mind Split

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The term 'body/mind split', if taken literally, lends itself to being used in a split way. This article proposes a more refined reformulation — understanding the split not as a literal divide between body and mind, but as the opposition between spontaneous and reflective processes — a move that transforms how body psychotherapy approaches its central concept.

KEY THEMES

— Re-formulating body/mind split as spontaneous vs reflective opposition

— Body Psychotherapy's anti-head bias and its shadow

— Bodymind integration as intersubjective tool, not normative agenda

— Spontaneous process as the living core beneath character armour

— The paradox: thinking about the split without taking sides

The Problem with 'Body/Mind Split'

Wilhelm Reich had a clear notion that it is the chronic opposition of body and mind which is at the root of neurosis. He — and Alexander Lowen after him — worked with the idea of the functional identity of body and mind. The neurotic bodymind is chronically split; the healthy bodymind experiences spontaneously the wholeness of that functional identity.

However, the term 'body/mind split', if taken literally, lends itself to being used in a split way. The tradition of Body Psychotherapy has suffered from an 'anti-head' bias, both in terms of theory and practice. It is perfectly possible for body-oriented therapists to re-enact the client's body/mind split whilst theoretically pursuing a clear idea of bodymind integration and 'wholeness'.

It is very hard to think about the split without taking sides — and therefore splitting. The bias is inherent even in Perls' famous saying: "Lose your head — come to your senses!" It was argued that the term 'split' in this context isn't quite consistent with its general use in analytic language. But rather than inventing new terms, I'd like to present what I consider a more refined and differentiated meaning of the concept.

A More Refined Formulation

The term 'body/mind split' may remain fruitful if used as a shorthand for the opposition between spontaneous processes and reflective processes. This way of re-formulating Reich's idea of the conflict underlying neurosis is not without difficulties, either, but is closer to a phenomenological formulation of actual experience. It is also consistent with complexity theory and notions of 'emergent' versus 'established' structures. Ken Wilber has comprehensively described the conflicting modes of consciousness involved in what he calls the 'European Split'.

What do I mean by 'reflective processes'? Human beings seem to be both blessed with and condemned to the capacity to interrupt, react against, hold back and reflect on spontaneous processes. In the context of the term 'body/mind split', 'mind' is only useful as a shorthand for this capacity to interrupt and hold back spontaneous processes. 'Reflective processes' include far more than strictly mental ones: in order to be effective, the force which reflects against a spontaneous movement needs to affect all levels from the mental right down to the physical. This can be a deliberate, temporary reaction — a holding, containing form of reflection — or it can be a chronic, fixed, habitual pattern which occurs outside of awareness. The first is an important source of human creativity (Jung's opus contra naturam). The latter is what Reich considered the root of 'neurosis' and what deserves the term 'body/mind split'.

What do I mean by 'spontaneous processes'? Anything which is not deliberate or voluntary, anything which happens to us rather than being chosen by us: all involuntary physical and psychophysical events — feelings arising, impulses, images, bodily sensations, symptoms. Spontaneous processes span the whole range from purely physiological events such as heartbeat and digestion, all the way through physical and emotional events, to imagination, reverie and dreams.

Re-formulating Bodymind Integration

In the bodywork tradition, 'bodymind integration' has frequently been used as a tool for objectification of the client. Body therapists have rather relentlessly pursued it as an agenda — something the therapist brings about on behalf of the client.

However, that is to blindly enact the objectifying relationship which the client already has with themselves. We are using the client's body as a tool and a battlefield to impose our agenda. The fact that many clients positively demand this enactment does not make it any less counter-therapeutic.

The only way we get out of this is by getting into it. We do not want to shrink from the danger of objectification: it is an important element of what brings the client to us. Bodymind integration, re-formulated, becomes a tool of intersubjective perception and involvement — not a normative objective to impose on the client.

From this perspective, the therapist's own bodymind process becomes the primary vehicle — the therapist's awareness of the fluctuating degree of their own bodymind integration or dis-integration in response to the relational field becomes the compass by which they navigate. The therapist's embodied awareness, not technique, is what transforms.

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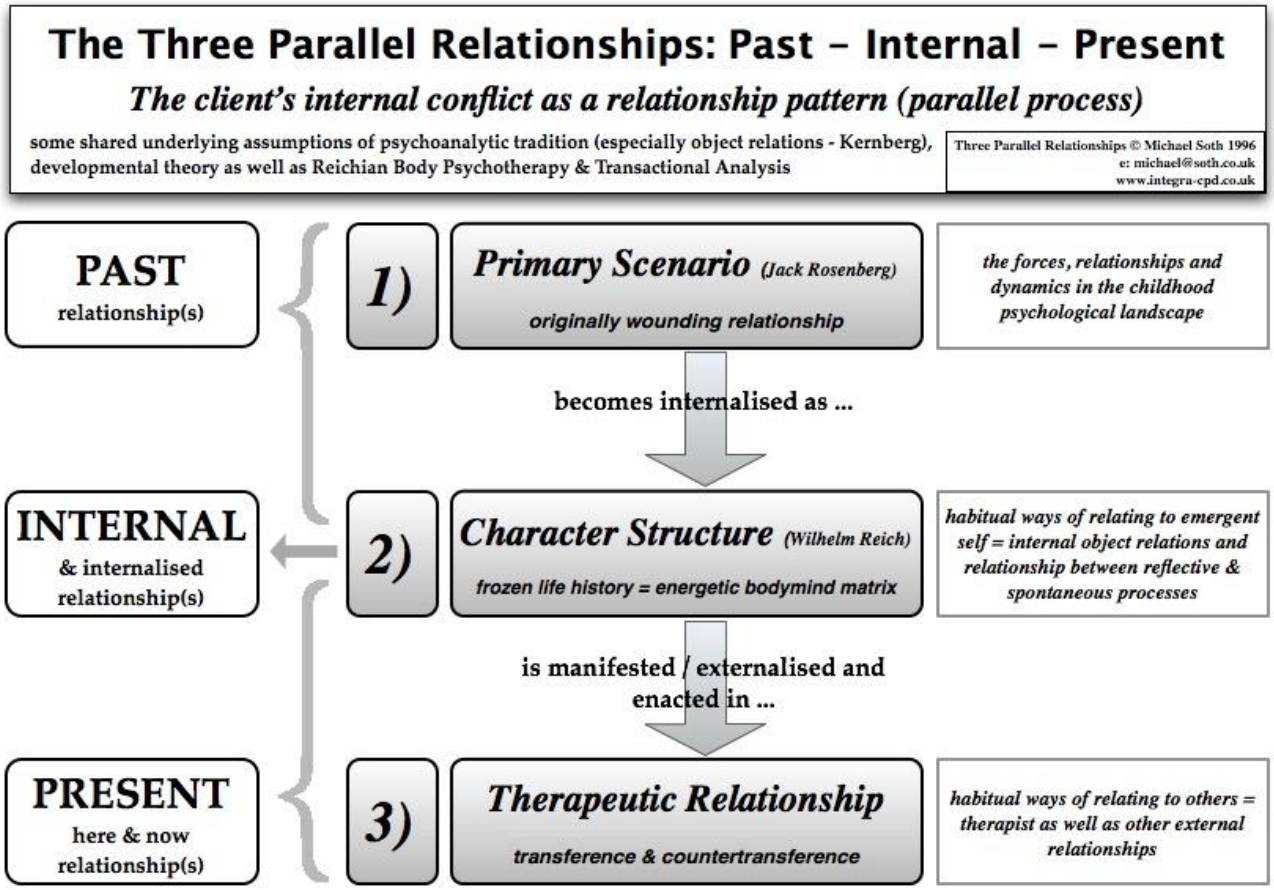
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The Three Parallel Relationships · Michael Soth, 1996

DIAGRAM · 1996 · MICHAEL SOTH

Three Parallel Relationships: Past - Internal - Present

The client's internal conflict as a relationship pattern (parallel process)

PAST	**1 · Primary Scenario** Originally wounding relationship	Forces & dynamics in the childhood psychological landscape
	becomes internalised as...	
INTERNAL	**2 · Character Structure** Frozen life history = energetic bodymind matrix	Habitual ways of relating to emergent self = internal object relations
	is manifested / externalised and enacted in...	
PRESENT	**3 · Therapeutic Relationship** Transference & countertransference	Habitual ways of relating to others = therapist & other external relationships

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