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BIOENERGY: REALITY OR DELUSION?

It is almost one year now (at the time of writing) since I attended an AHP bioenergy workshop. I have refrained from writing until now to control for the possibility that my initial negative feelings about the experience may have been transitory. I have now had sufficient time to consider the matter; what began as a rather vague feeling of dissatisfaction has now become consolidated into a coherent, or rather semi-coherent explanation of the day's events (say semi-coherent as my thoughts still have a long way to go to full maturity). I also wanted to resist writing an impulsive emotionally charged account of the event. Not that I think there is anything wrong with writing in this way, but simply that here I wish to be as objective as possible in my critique of bioenergetics as exemplified by that particular workshop.

What I am about to propose is that bioenergetic therapy is predicated upon a fallacious premise - namely the existence of 'energy flows', 'body armour', and so on. Such a suggestion has profound implications, for if such things do not exist then any perceived beneficial effect of the therapy has consequently to be attributable to other factors. What then might these other factors be?

Most of the participants at the workshop stated that they had little or no experience of such methods, and were thus apprehensive about breaking into smaller sub-groups under autonomous regulation until we had been given a demonstration of what it was all about. One subject who stated that he had long desired to work with the leader offered himself as a 'guinea-pig', and together the two of them proceeded to work through a bioenergetic sequence whilst the rest of us observed from the periphery of the room. It occurs to me that this demonstration served not merely as an **example** of bioenergetic therapy but as the **archetype**. It was uncanny how each participant in turn went through their own therapeutic session in not only the same sequence as that demonstrated but also with the same display of cathartic pain and ecstasy, comprising screams, grunts and thrashing of the limbs. The actions of the participants were somewhat reminiscent of the young child who emulates an adult in behaviours the significance of which he/she does not yet understand.

Upon consideration of my own performance I have to admit to dishonesty. To be candid I failed to experience anything at all in any 'real' sense - I was merely play-acting, adopting what I perceived to be the role of a bioenergetically charged person. After the event I felt like a fake. Now, I would venture to suggest that most, if not all of the others were in fact faking it as much as I was, even though they may not presently see it as such. We may have all interpreted it as a revealing experience when on the contrary it was nothing but a charade; rather analogous to a false sense of security which I am sure everyone has experienced at least once in their life.

I do not intend to enter into a highly technical debate on the psychological mechanisms that I believe to be involved in such displays, as I do not think Self and Society is the appropriate forum, but those interested in pursuing the matters raised here in greater detail are of course free to follow-up my references at their leisure.

The psychological literature abounds with illustrations of human activities and interaction where the contingencies as perceived by the participants failed to correspond with the actual contingencies operating. Aronson (1980) offers fine examples of people displaying behaviours, even irrational ones, as a result of extraneous factors yet who afterwards justify it in terms of internal mechanisms. Asch's (1951) now famous experiments on conformity and others that followed (Gerard, 1954; Schachter, 1941; Freedman & Doob 1968) indicate just how powerful is the influence of the group upon the individual. Bandura (1962) has shown the strength of the tendency in humans to imitate what another does, whilst in the realm of psychotherapy, Bandura (1977) and others (Frank, 1973; Shapiro & Morris, 1978; Truax, 1966) have demonstrated the significance of expectations upon outcome. Watson (1968) has even succeeded in breaking down an apparently complex Piagetian conservation task into its relatively simple stimulus-response components. Essentially then, what I am trying to suggest is that things are not always what they appear to be. What actually occurs in bioenergy workshops I contend, is a profound case of delusion.

Perhaps the most famous case of 'scientific' delusion is that of the French physicist Prof. Blondlot, who in 1902 was awarded the French Academy's Lalande Prize for the discovery of N-rays. It transpired, following the realisation that only French scientists could replicate his results that the N-ray existed only in Blondlot's imagination. The whole conception of N-rays was dismissed from physics as soon as it became known that his findings were merely the result of faulty human observation coupled with suggestion. Inevitably his career was ruined by the scandal. Such an example amply illustrates the

need to employ objective criteria in the assessment of one's theories: the same applies to the behavioural sciences in general and in particular to bioenergetics which is rooted in the physical sciences.

The events that took place at the AHP workshop can in my opinion be more readily and realistically understood in terms of the above theories (albeit elucidated only briefly and insufficiently here). The leader came to the workshop armed **a priori** with a system which prescribed to him, in complete detail, what he should find and what to look for. Following the demonstration the same applied to the rest of us. The reason why many participants may not have doubted the validity of the experience since the event may be explained in terms of selective attention (Baddeley 1976) and related theories, or simply because thus far its credibility has not been seriously questioned.

The school of bioenergetics, like its founder Reich, is suffering from 'total delusion syndrome' in my opinion, and its own exclusive jargon has become the vehicle for its mystification. Terms such as 'basic energy' and 'life force' which Reich and his followers refer to has surely to be seen as nothing more than simply an inadequate means of attempting to explain what is not understood. It is a mythical contrivance totally superfluous to the needs of human well-being. We now have access to such a vast reservoir of scientific knowledge about behaviour (including emotions), that even seemingly complex patterns of behaviour can be explained in far more concrete down-to-earth terms (see Boulougouris & Rabavilas 1977; Eysenck 1965a & b; Marx 1972 & 1977 - yes THE Marx; Skinner 1971 & 1974; and Wolpe 1958), thus rendering the jargon of bioenergetics redundant. In a recent article in *Self and Society* (Sundborn 1982) the author talks of the 'layers' of a person. Are humans to be somehow equated with onions? Of course I realise that it is merely metaphor - but it is unnecessary metaphor. The adoption of such jargon, a trend common to many humanistic approaches where the 'spiritual' element of humanity is said to be catered for, besides being redundant, also serves to relegate the subject of psychotherapy to the realms of pseudo-psychology and mysticism.

Agreed, none of this is significant unless you are concerned with gaining knowledge and understanding the truth; for otherwise one simply adopts the most immediately appealing theory. Whilst I appreciate that we shall probably never be able to know absolute truth, that should nevertheless prevent us from searching: as members of the helping professions - psychologists, therapists, social workers or whatever - I believe we are under an obligation to do just this.

Clients are not going to be helped by escape into fantasy when what might be needed for their long-term interest is assistance with reality. Like an LSD trip, Bioenergy workshops may be great fun at the time - likewise they get about as close to reality as the former's hallucinations.

Some of you might argue that therapy is in any case an art not a science, in which case my criticisms are thus without substance. Such an argument I contend, is to accept a false dichotomy between 'art' and 'science'. Truth is truth irrespective - it differs not for artists and scientists. The validity of any theory rests upon two conditions, viz that it be testable, and that the variables alluded to be quantifiable. Reichian (and also Freudian) derivatives do not conform to these conditions. Subjective claims that such therapies are effective are insufficient proofs in any scientific or philosophic sense.

CONCLUSION

The preceding critique is not, I have to admit, the result of one event but is rather the culmination of progressive discontent with the growth movement over the past couple of years. I feel that the movement is far too entrenched in middle class values, that it is totally out of reach of the working classes due to the nature of its practice as a private system of help rather than public (how would humanistic practitioners feel about the prospect of 'nationalisation?'), and that the development of its various alternative theories and therapies, and the client group to which it appeals, is essentially a means of perpetuating its own existence for its own benefit. Theories are invented, revived and revised, which serve to justify its belief that it is indeed a movement composed of skilled practitioners who possess a body of esoteric knowledge that others (the client) need in times of crisis.

To demystify the growth movement may be to destroy it; obviously then it would not be in the interest of many who may read this to accept my thesis. The most annoying thing for me is that despite all their noble ideas and liberal gestures, it seems that the average humanistic practitioner commands a pretty good income and is quite content to do no more than embrace the radical chic ethic of Hampstead or a West country hamlet, where group sessions appear to act as little more than a panegyric for the therapist or group leader.

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