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Vicarious Expression of Feelings

This article is a report of a therapeutic experience which made a considerable impression on me at the time and which helped me gain some meaning from the interpersonal defence of projection induction and the work of the body therapists. It naturally contains speculation.

For three months I held twice weekly sessions with a client: there was a history of marital difficulty culminating in separation and other relationship problems. Money had been a very contentious issue in the marriage. They were both frugal in practice but the husband seems to have expressed strong feelings about wastage. In the eleventh session, my last session of the day prior to a restful evening at home, she began by saying that she felt 'quite *tensed up*. . . .*clenched up*'. She went on to talk about sharing in her marriage and how her husband had been '*rigorous*' over spending money. This led to family finances when she had been a child at home; she went on to talk of an occasion when she 'wouldn't sit on the pot properly. . . .and so (her mother) used to strap me to the play pen bars and leave me for a long time'. This was told in a matter of fact sort of voice and there was no clear affect. The session ended soon afterwards.

The following morning I woke up with a severe back pain which seemed to be spread down most of one side of my back from the shoulder. I found this almost incapacitating. After some self massage, a hot soak and a liberal application of an analgesic rub, I was able to work. The only association to this pain seemed to be the therapy session.

Somehow the session seemed to have stirred up important feelings in me. I had no dream recollections but I did have the acute discomfort of the muscle spasm. It seemed that I had given up the stress of carrying some kind of burden: my inability to continue to carry it was expressed by the presence of an incapacitating pain. I began to wonder if I had expressed the carrying of this burden for my client and began to recall the ways in which she had talked about the sharing of feelings and the need to separate. I focussed on her power struggle with her mother; the play pen straps. Perhaps I had had identificatory feelings of which I had been unaware and these had been expressed in my back.

At this stage I consulted my session notes: she had felt tensed up and clenched up at the start. I seemed now to be expressing this tension for her. I had accepted it from her in the session in a way I did not understand. Guthrie and Mattinson (1), referring to the projection of feelings, say 'people can do this. . . . when the feelings are too painful. . . .to hold on to'. . . .'they then dispose of (the feelings) into another person. . . .'. . . .

After a further night the generalised pain had subsided but it was still intensely localised in the trapezius muscle. Massage by an experienced and skilful colleague did much to alleviate this local pain; this massage was accompanied by considerable pain, indicating to me that a lot of emotional energy had been bound in this way.

In speculating about what happened (and it can only be a speculation) it seemed that here had been a projection of feelings from my client which I had been unconsciously or unawaresly induced to take on and I had played out my part in this induction. Laing (2) refers to the attempts by people 'to regulate the inner life of the other (person) in order to preserve his own' through transpersonal defences such as induction. In some concealed way, unconscious material of mine was augmented and focussed by the shared experience of therapy so that it sought liberation through the armouring of the muscular layer, in which Lowen (3) asserts are found 'the chronic muscular tensions that support and justify the ego defences and at the same time protect the person against the underlying layer of suppressed feelings that he dare not express'.

I have no hesitation in identifying that feeling as anger: anger that my client could not express openly, anger that was perhaps deeply buried. Anger that I shared at some level and which I found a somatic way of expressing. If I had had an opportunity to explore the session in supervision, to focus on my feelings and to express them, then perhaps I would not have expressed them somatically. It appears to me very important in therapy to enable clients to express and *complete* their bad feelings so that they can move on to have good feelings. Similarly, if people have bad *sensations* such as muscle pain, then massage can help complete those sensations. My client may have completed her bad feelings about childhood events vicariously in me. Although she did not see me do it and I did not talk with her about it, I did survive. Maybe my survival was important to her in that it meant that her bad feelings were not so dangerous that they could not be expressed or mastered.

REFERENCES

- (1) Guthrie, L., Mattison, J. : *Brief casework with a marital problem*. London: Institute of Marital Studies, 1971
 - (2) Laing, R. D. : *Self and Other*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971
 - (3) Lowen, A. : *Bio-energetics*. London: Coventure, 1976
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