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Empirical Research in Bioenergetic Analysis: The State of the Art

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Empirical research in bioenergetics has been sparse and is still in its incipient stages. Most of the studies available are the products of doctoral dissertations. Many are superficial, oversimplistic, and methodologically confounded. Therefore, there are great limitations on inferences which may be drawn from these studies. However, it is worthy of note that research efforts are being made in bioenergetics. It is to our benefit to acknowledge the studies that have been conducted, recognize their limitations, glean what information is valuable, and encourage and support further investigation.

This article will review the current state of the art in bioenergetic research. Studies have focused on character structure, reliability, effects of bioenergetic therapy, and observational and clinical case studies.

Character Structure *Personality Inventories*

There have been several attempts to devise a written measure of personality, based on Lowen's (1958, 1973, 1975) assertions regarding character structure. Kerberg (1977) developed a personality inventory designed to discriminate between the five bioenergetic character types: schizoid, oral, psychopathic, masochistic, and rigid. He discovered a statistically significant

relation between therapists' judgements and scores on his Bioenergetic Body Type Test only for schizoid and oral character types. Shostrom (1977, 1978) continued this line of investigation and developed the Growth Process Inventory (GPI), which attempted to describe a person along the dimensions of the five hypothetically pure character types and six scales postulated to be indicators of "actualizing" (Maslow 1962). It consists of true-false questions which ask about the respondent's attitudes, beliefs, feelings about self, and early history, although less than half of the questions pertain to the bioenergetic character types.

Criterion validity studies of the GPI have been conducted by Levison (1978), comparing "actualizing" and "non-actualizing" groups; Baxter (1980), comparing people who were and were not in a program of transcendental meditation; and Sucec (1979), investigating the relationship between character type and somatotype. Lockwood (1981) modified earlier versions of the inventory by adding items to draw on other indicators of behavior and to combine them with personality and characterological descriptions from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM - III)* of the American Psychiatric Association (1980). Baham (1981) conducted a validity study of this later version by comparing subjects' actual scores and bioenergetic analysts' predictions of the subjects' scores on the Anxiety Scale and the bioenergetic dimensions.

Few conclusions can be drawn about bioenergetic character types on the basis of these validity studies of the GPI. Because the face validity of the bioenergetic scales may be questioned, and because the discriminability among its scales is weak, statements about bioenergetic character types as determined by the GPI should be viewed only with extreme caution.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the bioenergetic scales refer to character type, not body type or body expression, as has been mistakenly stated (Baham 1981; Baxter 1980; and Kerberg 1977). There is no demonstrated relationship between these scales and any physical characteristics, nor is there any expressed relationship between the scales and designations of bioenergetic body types. Conclusions about physical structure or body types, based on the results of the Inventory, must be

viewed with even greater caution than statements referring to character types.

Prezza et al. (1984) also attempted to devise a written measure of character structure. Though there were difficulties with their study regarding judges' sample size, they developed a questionnaire which was able to differentiate a control group from subjects judged to be schizoid and subjects judged to be masochistic.

Relations Between Physical Structure and Character Structure

Krepack (1980) examined the relationship between breathing patterns and personality style. While his sample of raters was limited to only two, and is therefore insufficient for generalization, he found significant inter-rater reliability in the raters' ability to distinguish between abdominal and thoracic breathers. He used Gough's Adjective Check List (1960) to determine that each breathing pattern reflected a characteristic personality style. His findings are consistent with the patterns one might expect if a dichotomous division of the character types were made according to their position on a developmental continuum. The developmentally more primitive character types—the schizoid, oral, and psychopathic structures—would be well represented by the general description of thoracic breathers, while the developmentally more advanced types—the masochistic and rigid structures—would be well represented by the description of abdominal breathers.

Lest these findings be taken too simplistically, the complexity of the interrelationship of character traits was also indicated by the individual variability of breathing styles, within the abdominal/thoracic dichotomy. This reinforces the concept that it is essential that a bioenergetic analysis of an individual attend to the full range of breathing styles, within the two patterns, and strive to understand the individuality of that person's breathing, as it relates to the whole body of the person and as it expresses a functional relationship for the individual.

Dudas (1981) examined the psychopathic character structure and found that raters showed a significant inter-rater reliability in being able to identify people with a psychopathic body type,

as defined solely by a disproportionate development of the upper body in relation to the lower half of the body. Using Gough's Adjective Check List (1960) and the FIRO - B (Schutz 1967) to explore correlates of personality characteristics, he found that a person with a psychopathic body type might be described as someone who exhibits a need to dominate in relations with others and whose self-presentation is forceful and strongwilled. There would also be a tendency to act independently, autonomously, and assertively. Such an individual would be more apt to manipulate or coerce others than to defer to them. This description is consistent with that offered by Lowen (1975) for the psychopathic character type.

Pinhey (1981), using biofeedback equipment, examined the psychophysiological difference between schizoid and non-schizoid character types, as determined by the Avoiding Scale of the earlier version of the GPI. He found no significant difference between the two groups; however, the muscle tension levels in the schizoid group were higher than those of the non-schizoid, the skin conductance levels were higher in the schizoid group except for a "stress response" period, and the fingertip temperature was lower for the schizoid group. While these results are interesting, though non-significant, the same cautions must be exercised in viewing them as with other studies based on the GPI.

Correlations Between Character Types and Other Measures of Personality

Scott (1979) conducted an investigation to determine whether there was a direct relationship between bioenergetic therapists' ratings of character structure and the Validity, Clinical, and Ego Strength scales of the MMPI (Hathaway and McKinley 1967). The resulting correlations were few and low in magnitude. In looking for a direct relationship, though, there exists a great problem of translation between systems. Lack of correlation may be indicative of sampling different domains of behavior or character rather than reflecting inadequacies of either system. In this study, the sample of patients was too small to permit correlations of therapists' ratings and MMPI profiles

which would utilize two-point scales or other, more sophisticated configural patterns. Such an approach would have reflected a more dynamic interpretation than the more static result obtained from the individual scores alone.

Prezza et al. (1984) examined whether the Draw-a-Person test (Machover 1949) and the Body Cathexis Test (Secord and Jourard 1953) would reflect aspects of character structure for groups of schizoid subjects and masochistic subjects. While they discovered certain patterns, their study was again limited by the sample size of judges.

Global Approaches

To mediate some of these difficulties of translation between systems and to address the discrepancies of focal points between a given criterion and a bioenergetic perspective of character types, Shubs (1982) used a global approach. As a general measure of validity for the diagnostic aspect of bioenergetic analysis, he had judges match video tapes of subjects with narratives derived from those subjects' MMPI's. While the inability of the judges seemed to reflect difficulties in the criterion system used for devising the narratives, the fact that certain narratives were selected significantly more frequently than others would seem to indicate that there were aspects of the people's appearance and/or presentation of self to which the judges were responding and which held certain consensually held inferences of personality.

Reliability

King (1972) studied the relationship between associated personality traits and body parts. She compiled the Body Structure and Personality Questionnaire consisting of forty-seven hypothesized associations between a body part or posture and a given personality trait. Forty-one items had at least 70% agreement with the stated associations among bioenergetic therapists. These high levels of agreement referred to attributions or associations made between body parts and personality traits and are

not indicators of agreement based on an actual assessment of a person's body. They serve, therefore, as a measure of reliability of association, rather than an indicator of reliability of determining the body characteristics upon which the associations are made.

Berkowitz (1978) took an initial step towards exploring this problem of the reliability of assessment. He had raters view a video tape of subjects and indicate how much of a given character trait each subject had. His results indicated poor inter-rater reliability, although methodological difficulties present several ways the findings may be interpreted.

The high inter-rater reliabilities reported by Krepack (1980) and Dudas (1981) suggest that the determinants of body readings can be reliably assessed. The high percentage of agreement of association between character trait and body part, reported by King (1972), when combined with these findings of Krepack (1980) and Dudas (1981), suggests that, among trained practitioners, reliable assessments of character type may be made by examining the structure and functioning of the body.

Effects of Bioenergetic Techniques in Therapy

Sheridan (1980) used a phenomenological approach to investigating the effects of bioenergetic therapy. All subjects reported greater access, acceptability, and depth to their feelings, and all reported having gained an understanding of the concept of grounding. Various other gains were identified in each of the areas of experience studied, leading to the conclusion that bioenergetics can address a variety of character and situational concerns.

In another broad survey of patients' assessments of bioenergetic therapy, Johnson (1975) used a questionnaire survey of patients. He found that patients evaluated their therapy positively and reported a broad range of gains which were also experienced by patients in other modalities of therapy. They reported a growth in self-awareness and self-strength, a closer contact with their feelings, and a more alive physical feeling.

Conclusion

Empirical research in bioenergetics has focused primarily on character structure. Investigations have centered on four areas:

- 1) construction of paper-and-pencil tests of character structure,
- 2) examinations of specifically asserted associations between physical structure and character structure,
- 3) correlations of character types with purported measures of those types, and
- 4) comparisons between dynamic formulations of character structure and global or multidimensional aspects of character.

The first of these approaches is limited by the dynamic quality of character types, the questionable basis upon which those tests were constructed, and the poor discriminability between types. In addition, there are several difficulties inherent in self-report inventories (Anastasi 1976), the most significant for bioenergetics being the distinction between a trait, which is more representative of character structure, and a state, which is more situational and more sensitive to detection in personality inventories.

The second area of investigation has proven quite promising. The high reliability of bioenergetic practitioners' assertions about the relationship between body parts and personality traits, demonstrated by King (1972), provides a fertile ground for studies to enhance and refine our understanding of the associations routinely made in clinical practice.

The third area, though conceptually sound, is limited by the problem of translation of terminology between systems and the variability of focal points between a criterion and a bioenergetic perspective of character types. The difficulty is in finding a criterion that has sufficient conceptual overlap with a bioenergetic perspective to allow a significant positive correlation to emerge.

The fourth approach is an attempt to mediate between difficulties inherent in each of the other three areas. It attempts to address the dynamic interplay of character functions within

an individual. Again, there emerge problems of the validity of a criterion and translation between systems. While the second approach seems to be the most promising for examining the validity of given trait dimensions within a character type, this method seems to be the most promising for investigating the validity of an overall bioenergetic analysis of a person with all of their various character traits and complexities.

Studies on the reliability of bioenergetic assessments are few. However, they begin to suggest that, among trained practitioners, reliable assessments of character type may be made by examining the structure and functioning of the body. Further studies need to be conducted with fully trained and experienced bioenergetic therapists.

Research concerning the effects of bioenergetics has been primarily phenomenological. Patients who have been in treatment have found it to have facilitated personal change in a number of areas of their lives.

The most prevalent research is the body of case studies which describe the methods, concepts, and effects of using bioenergetics with patients. While these form the backbone of the theory and practice of bioenergetics, there remains much empirical research to be done to support the foundations of theory and clinical experience upon which bioenergetics stands.

Although much of the empirical research is flawed, there is something to be gained from these early efforts. These studies may be modified or others constructed to be methodologically sound enough to provide useful and meaningful information concerning the theory, techniques, and effects of bioenergetic therapy. It is to our advantage as clinicians to applaud the efforts of these initial studies and support further, rigorously designed research. These may help to provide bioenergetics with a greater acceptance in academic and research departments, wider applications of our work, a critical reevaluation of bioenergetic concepts and practices, and a richer understanding of the person and the therapy process.

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