

**B I O E N E R G E T I C
A N A L Y S I S**

*The Clinical Journal of the
International Institute
for Bioenergetic Analysis*

VOLUME 12 ♦ NUMBER 1 ♦ WINTER 2001

CURRENT TRENDS IN BIOENERGETIC THERAPY, BRAZIL

Odila Weigand

Summary

At times of transition, the way is open to bring forth new issues. Alexander Lowen is retiring from his work as Head of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis,—and it seems a good time to discuss some aspects of the theory and therapy which for 45 years has been reflecting the personality of the founder of the IIBA. We are going to focus on three aspects of the therapeutic process, taking into account the *Theory of Conflict* and the *Theory of Deficit: Building the Structure, Dissolving Character Resistances and Integrating Conflicts*.

Introduction

I chose to speak about the current panorama of Bioenergetics because Alexander Lowen and Bioenergetic Analysis cannot be dissociated in our minds. As some of you already know, Alexander Lowen left in 1996 the chairmanship of the International Institute, and Bioenergetic Analysis proceeds on its growth, not without him, since he is alive and working as a therapist. However, he is no more the Head of the Institute, the leader who provides directions for the theory and the practice of bioenergetic psychotherapy.

This is a fact: Bioenergetics finds itself in a moment of transition. When after 40 years of leadership Lowen leaves the direction of the Institute, who was chosen by the Institute's members as its new leader? A woman called Virginia Wink Hilton, who lives in California. As Reich said, all things occur in a process of Thesis and Antithesis, leading to a Synthesis. In that sense, in 1998 we find ourselves at the stage of Antithesis. I hope that having understood this moment's meaning, we shall be able to avoid radicalism. However, it is significant that after having for so long followed a father, we should have now chosen a mother to lead us.

Lowen has been a strong and authoritarian personality, and his Institute has been marked by a patriarchal style of leadership. However Lowen developed a rare quality, the quality of those who have acquired wisdom, that quality of looking at themselves through the light of their own knowledge. In addition, he was able to perceive the narcissistic hierarchic struc-

ture that usually appears in every organization, especially when there exists a charismatic leader.

It's curious how history repeats itself, but with a good grounding, we can see how it is possible to arrive at a different solution. Lowen himself tells during an interview to Ron Robbins, an episode of his relationship with Reich. He speaks about the hierarchic structure that had been formed around Reich. That happened when Lowen, having graduated as a Medical Doctor, returned from Switzerland and was beginning his practice in the United States. It was the year of 1951. These are his words:

“Reich was at the top of the structure, like a god. The Reichian therapists were in that structure like angels and archangels. Those who believed in Reich and in his therapy were saved, and the rest of the world would be cursed. That was how I saw him. I can't say if it was really like that, only that this was how I saw him”.... “Reich's disciples had developed an almost fanatic devotion towards him and his work. It was considered presumptuous, if not heretical, to question Reich's statements or to alter his concepts according to one's own experience.” Lowen thought that his colleagues were “too dogmatic”. “They merely repeated Reich's statements, nobody offered an independent interpretation and when I did so, it was rejected.”

More than 30 years afterwards Lowen finds himself in a similar position. He was being constantly quoted and some of his followers tended to treat part of his concepts as if they were dogmas. Theories are good as long as they are not turned into doctrines.

After having prepared himself many years before taking this step, Lowen decided to retire, which makes it easier for us to scrutinize his work with a certain detachment. He leaves open the way for new branches of knowledge to appear, for new rich ways of putting his discoveries into practice.

Who among body therapists of different schools has not already read some of Lowen's works, either agreeing with or criticizing his ideas? He created theories, new ways to work with the body, he taught and formed hundreds of therapists who are now working in Europe, in the U.S.A., in Canada, South America and Israel. Lowen's School formed professionals during more than 40 years. He had contact with many leading therapists, exerting great influence upon them, therapists who founded their own schools. From Lowen's association with John Pierrakos arose the basic notions of Bioenergetic Analysis. Afterwards John Pierrakos followed his own path, making researches on the aura and the chakras. Pierrakos started also his own school, Core Energetics, where he combines the teachings of Bioenergetic Analysis, of Character Analysis, of Analysis of Resistance, with

a spiritual approach brought by his wife, Eva.

Lowen's Contributions

Which would be the most relevant aspect of Lowen's teachings? I would say that the main element is **GROUNDING**. Lowen's and Pierrako's merit was the discovery that to unblock the body, they should work differently from Reich's methods of unblocking "rings of tension" by beginning from the eyes towards the pelvis. They began with the legs, in order to enable the legs to receive the energy liberated from above, discharge it to the ground, proceeding then gradually to direct it **upwards** through each segment. Freeing the legs for the energetic flow is not the same as unblocking the pelvic ring. When we set the legs free and bring life into them, we are strengthening the ego, increasing contact with reality.

Grounding means to be rooted onto the planet, it means getting in touch with the reality which makes us into human beings, all alike, feeling our emotions, being able to love and to suffer, to feel compassion, joy and pleasure. Grounding is the reality of our feelings, experienced in a very alive and vibrant body, and not at all a merely mental experience. Lowen showed us that it is possible to develop in the body, through exercises, the ability to **vibrate** and in this manner to dissolve rigidity at the same time as we are creating conditions for the body tissue to tolerate a stronger energetic charge. When we can tolerate more energetic charge in movement, we develop greater ability to feel our emotions fully, with consciousness.

Trends

What are the trends in the current panorama of Bioenergetics?

- Critical appraisal of the theoretical concepts and of the clinical practice, trying to determine what is truly useful for that specific patient. Separate the theory from the myth, separate it from the myth-person of its creator.
- To develop researches in order to verify the efficiency of the various psychotherapeutical practices.
- To build ego structure, to dissolve character resistances and integrate conflicts. These goals lead us to a practice that integrates the Theories of Conflict and of Deficit (deficit for those experiences that are essential to build a healthy ego). This will be the subject we will consider in this presentation.
- To search for adequate ways to handle borderline patients; not only the organization of the borderline, but also the cases of temporary

loss of personal body/emotional/psychological/energetic limits, a situation which may happen with rigid structures, when rigidity is released suddenly and one loses the external references responsible for the sense of identity. Panic attacks occur in such situations.

- Multidisciplinarity .
- Extending therapy to low income population.

Avoiding myths

Let us talk about the myth. Among Lowen's various most valuable contributions to therapeutic methods on how to handle the different character styles, I find that *Narcissism—The Denial of the True Self* is the most important. I also think that it is the most autobiographical. In this book the author looked deep inside himself, and explained a dynamic very useful for us to understand better the neurosis that permeates our culture. Moreover, exactly because he grasped such a meaningful aspect of the truth, he could not avoid a mistake common to many who discover something important: the mistake of **generalization**. These generalizations caused some theoretical misunderstandings, which reflected themselves in the practice, as we shall soon see. Several therapists are maybe using Bioenergetics in a way that can be "too much" for some patients. Other therapists observed that sometimes there seemed to be created a lack of real empathic understanding between them and their patients and they chose to take a distance from Bioenergetic Analysis. And there were others who persisted and developed their work according to the principles of Bioenergetic Analysis, trying to find out what it presents that can be indeed useful for a certain specific patient, and trying to integrate the comprehension of personality and bioenergetic techniques with the knowledge obtained from other schools of Psychology. We are looking for other sources of knowledge that may complement our views.

Now let us talk about something that may appear as a **controversy**, the *Theory of Conflict* based on the Theory of Pulsions by Freud, and the *Theory of Deficit*, based on Melanie Klein and her followers.

The Function of the Orgasm and Orgasm Potency

Before we proceed with our subject: *Building Structure, Dissolving Character Resistances and Integrating Conflicts*, I would like to talk about the concepts of the function of the orgasm and orgasm potency.

I have been asking myself if the Function of the Orgasm is still a valid

concept for achieving one's evolution: and I came to the conclusion that the answer is YES: when we look upon it as a **path to attain a healthy, satisfactory emotional life**. The Function of the Orgasm is not an exhaustively explored subject; it offers still new ways for us to explore orgasmic experiences. We may call orgasmic experience any occasion where we experiment union, expansion, sexuality, love, pleasure, emotional nourishment, with or without genital contact. In this sense, remembering Reich, I would say that he was quite right in describing the Function of Orgasm as a model of Life itself. However, his inferences about orgasmic potency presents limited application, in my opinion, for handling most disorders that currently afflict our patients.

However, I do believe that the concept of Orgasmic Potency, as a means to attain mental and physical health, has influenced for many years the development of Bioenergetic Analysis, in its theory as well as in its practice. It was only in 1992 that Lowen left aside officially this concept and declared publicly that he now believed that the aim of bioenergetic therapy was the experience of self perception, self expression and self possession; in other words, to know yourself, to express your truth and to be your own master. From then on Lowen says that the main goal of therapy is the **healthy ego**, and sexuality is to be manifested as **one of the ways through which that healthy ego expresses itself**.

Lowen's Path

Let us review some aspects of Lowen's personal history, which shall help us to understand better his development and the evolution of Bioenergetic Analysis during the past 45 years.

Ron Robbins in his work "*Rhythmic Integration*" describes Lowen as a Realizer, and this being a trait of rigid characters.

Lowen graduated from Law School at the time of the Big Depression in 1934, a time when jobs were scarce; he went on with his studies and got the degree of Doctor magna cum laude in Law. He also worked in summer camps as an athletic trainer, and there he discovered that physical exercises had a positive effect on mental health. He was fascinated by that discovery and was searching for a theory to explain what he observed. In 1940 he attended a conference of Wilhelm Reich, who had come a few years before to live in the U.S.A. In Ron Robbins words: "...Attending Reich's lectures, Lowen felt himself identified with him, became his student and wanted to become a Reichian therapist. He was strongly identified with the charismatic Reich."

Let us focus an interesting example of how Reich handled transference, reinforcing a positive aspect of Lowen's character. Lowen himself tells us: One day Reich told him "if you are really interested in this work, you must follow the only possible way, which is getting into therapy." Lowen did not think that he needed therapy. He thought of himself as a man fairly without conflicts and successful within the limits of his time. He answered frankly to Reich: "I am interested, but what I really wish is to become famous." Reich took it seriously and answered "I shall make you famous." Does it sound too pompous? Narcissistic? Well let us hear Lowen's own words: "Years after that I was sure Reich's words had been a **prophecy**. They had been the push I needed at the time to overcome my resistance and develop the work of my life."

The Theory of Conflict and the Theory of Deficit

The dissolution of Resistances

There followed many years of working, experiencing with people, giving lectures and demonstrations, adding new discoveries achieved by himself or by others like Fritz Perls. Lowen makes use of Gestalt methods and Perls was influenced by Lowen. Besides elaborating body techniques, the core of the **theory** of Bioenergetics was developing based on Freudian psychoanalysis, which adopted as a starting point the drive theory. **For many years Lowen believed and taught that "issues of childhood (from the pre-oedipal phases) cannot be solved before the oedipal conflict has been completely analyzed, understood and worked through."** That means that **"sexual issues should be the first to be treated by the therapist. All possible problems and difficulties presented by the patient should be analyzed as defenses and resistances against sexuality."**

From that point of view, he focused his work on the Dissolution of Resistances, following Reich's teachings.

It is a well-known observation that therapists prefer one theory to another, often moved by their own character style. Reich is associated with the rigid characters, but also with impulsive characters, which by the way was the subject of his first publication. Lowen is associated with the rigid characters and with the structure of the phallic narcissistic, and in his book on Narcissism he made a deep contribution to our analytic comprehension. The basic issue of the rigid character is the oedipal phase, and its constellation of triangular relationship, rivalry, jealousy, and castration fear. Most important to understand this phase of child development is Freud's theory of instincts and the idea of ever-present **conflict**. For Lowen, it was a natu-

ral step to follow this current. Unlike other theoreticians of Psychoanalysis like Otto Kernberg, Lowen says that narcissism has its origin in the oedipal phase as a result of the seduction exerted by the parent of the opposite sex, making the child feel that she is “special.” In order to meet that expectation of being special, the child may give up her own Self and create a False Self to answer the narcissistic needs of the beloved parent. From those ideas of Lowen, based on instinctual theory and placing the main focus on the work with the oedipal phase, developed a theoretic current and a pattern of clinical practice, followed by many therapists for a long time. Nevertheless, we know now that the oedipal stage is one of conflict, a position of rivalry and mostly a position of losing. Moreover, it is here that I believe Lowen made the mistake of **generalizing**: Lowen explained very well the dynamics of rigid characters but he generalized when he taught that other characters should be treated in the same way. (*Ego, Character and Sexuality*, 1987, when he was supporting the movement he called “Back to Basics”).

I believe that this movement “Back to Basics”, which Lowen defended in 1987 (where he insisted that the Theory of Conflict was the true theoretic basis of Bioenergetic Analysis) was one extreme of a pendular movement, trying to preserve the purity of Reichian principles, purity that seemed threatened by the new concepts, demanding a revision of old ideas that had turned almost into dogmas, like the priority given to the work with the oedipal phase. However, as everything in life, the pendulum must go back.

Building the Structure

The Theory of Conflict (inspired in Freud’s Theory of Instincts) — adopted by Reich and by Lowen says that problems are a result of the conflicts between desire and repression. This is true for those organizations that reached the oedipal phase with a fairly good structure, and at that time, from 3-1/2 years to 5 years of age, they crystallized their character defenses around the constellation of oedipal conflicts (triangular relationship, jealousy, rivalry, desire for the parent of the opposite sex). But what about the others, those who have been inadequately treated at the critical developmental phase, without contact, without the stimuli essential to reach an oedipal organization seemingly intact, those whose egos did not have the chance to develop as they should, in harmony with the energy of the impulses? The infantile Ego must have the sort of experiences that contribute to build a strong enough structure, capable of containing and dealing with the power of the impulses. Needs of being held, seen, recognized, loved unconditionally, when unmet, constitute developmental gaps that

remain under the cover of character resistances, as we can see them in present life. A character defense is formed to hide a deficit, or a wound, and we use it to compensate that deficit, so we do not suffer and can go on living. However, often those needs must be attended to before we touch any defense, before we try to dissolve the defenses. Actually it means that a person with a fragile ego, with physical difficulty to hold, channel and direct her energy in her daily life, (even though that person may bring openly into therapy her sexual problems), she cannot be helped if we deal directly with these issues; they are potentially dangerous to the structure. The strong sexual charge may threaten the fragile ego structure.

At the same time as Bioenergetics continued to develop using the Theory of Conflict, other psychoanalytic schools followed in the United States the ideas of Melanie Klein, conducting research about issues of pre-genital phases. In the United States under the names of Ego Psychology and Self Psychology, those schools followed Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg and Alice Miller. In Europe, Winnicott and soon after Daniel Stern spread their work, as part of Object Relations Theory. Since 1970, thanks especially to Margareth Mahler, other researches were published, focusing the behavior of healthy families and healthy children. However, it was only in 1975 that Margareth Mahler's book was published: *The psychological birth of the human infant* representing an important step to the study of Health — what contributes in a normal child to build a healthy ego.

The concept of Arrested Development became popular, signifying the absence of some **essential experience** needed for the ego to form a healthy structure in a certain developmental phase, causing a "hole" in the personality, due to some traumatic event or to a lack of experience. That "hole" will form the NARCISSISTIC WOUND. For example, if a mother suffers from depression and panic crisis after giving birth, and she refuses to even see her baby, because she is not able to tolerate the child's oral demands, that child will grow and develop compensating that hole, that narcissistic wound, possibly with a rigid behavior — "I do not need anybody." The therapy in this case must be different from the case of a child whose mother was always near, nursing her, and met her first rejection when she was 5 years old, in the oedipal phase. This second child may in the surface react also with a rigid behavior — "I do not need anybody," but her story and the treatment would be different.

We can observe often that if some theory or some praxis meet with success, it will be very difficult to change them. It took quite some time for the professionals who had been trained in the Theory of Conflict, and were

quite satisfied with that model, to accept the new ideas. But why new? Actually, they were not so new. They supposed an integration of Melanie Klein's view with Freud's view. What does that mean? In a few words, it means that the model of conflict, which deals basically with the conflicts of the oedipal phase, was not enough to help people suffering from traumas of an earlier phase, with narcissistic wounds caused in the pre-natal phase, or at birth, or in the first days or months after birth. On the contrary, such patients felt worse when they were treated in the same way as other patients whose trauma had begun at the oedipal phase.

In 1992, people within Bioenergetics became aware of the link between this controversy and the issue of Orgastic Potency. During the International Conference in Miami, there was much discussion on whether Reich's proposition about Orgastic Potency was still valid. In 1992 Lowen reviewed his position in the International Conference in Miami, and recognized that he had been mistaken in some issues and that he had been arrogant. He had always said that the acceptance of our own failure and of our fragility brought with it the real strength and the assurance of survival. He succeeded in following the pendular movement backwards: in 1987 he had adopted a more rigid and authoritarian position when he started the "Back to Basics" movement—and in 1992 he reviewed that position, softened the rigidity, and corrected the path. It is my belief that the great quality that supports the strength and survival of Lowen's school is this capacity of reviewing, of going from one extreme to the other of the pendular movement, to arrive at a satisfactory synthesis.

The apparent controversy generated by the time span that it took to review and integrate the theories of Object Relations and Ego Psychology into Bioenergetic Analysis was an extended adjustment period. Californian therapists, among others, were the first to adopt these theories and to use them in their practice; therapists in New York followed later.

The synthesis of these two theories led to a change of pattern. What had been considered a pathology or a character attitude, to be unmasked and dismantled, became now known as a twisted expression of the genuine needs of contact, basic safety and basic trust, love, mirror reflection, recognition. Following the acknowledgement of a new theoretic pattern, it derives a new understanding of energetic processes and bodily interventions corresponding to this modified understanding. There is an adaptation of the way in which the therapist's role in transference and counter-transference is perceived. As Winnicott used to say, a good mother ADAPTS HERSELF to her child's needs.

What appeared to be **two** different currents are actually complementary and end by joining into one sole movement of the wave that constitutes good therapy.

During the treatment the therapist should at the same time act in two ways: be receptive (resonance, holding) and be defying (confront).

Integrating Conflicts

Within the proposition of multidisciplinary, the way is open to search in other psychotherapeutic schools for complementary elements for Bioenergetic Analysis.

For example, to solve conflicts, besides working with personal symptoms, we could use theory and practices of Systems Therapy, Couples or Family Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, NLP, etc.

Where to now?

Theories are born from the observation of facts. Well, the facts observed by Reich and Lowen were their patients, and what they could see were the results caused mainly by a repressive society. Nevertheless, many things changed after 1970, when the social barriers regarding sex and authority were shaken. People changed. The young generations are no longer restricted to their families' influence. Children became exposed to the world, watching TV, or at school, since a very early age. The drugs generation left its marks even on non-users of drugs. Don't we appreciate music composed and sung by people who used drugs, like Elis Regina (a famous Brazilian singer who died of cocaine overdose) and the Beatles?

This century ends with a phylogenetic evolution following its slow rhythm, but such rhythm is violated by the vertiginous speed of the changes in society, economy and culture. People are stressed by the violence imposed on them from the outside, and what they really need is to build their egos, instead of having their defense mechanism dismantled. Defenses became more primitive, they changed place. From the muscle, they migrated to the energetic field. Is that bad? I already begin to believe in something I have been suspecting for some time: this is part of the evolution of mankind, it seems inevitable that in our days people operate **more** with their energetic field in comparison with twenty years ago.

The increasing number of people with frail border organizations should not be considered a calamity; it could be seen as a byproduct of the need to live with the **inconstancy** of our objects. Piaget showed how object constancy is essential to the formation of the ego. I would even say that we all

need to be somehow borderline, in order to absorb the changes around us—diluted limits makes it easier to change into new adaptive styles and behaviors. Our limits are diluted when we lose external and internal references that organized our sense of identity. I intend to talk about some energetic aspects of this process of change, as the Energy Draining. In another paper I will speak of an energetic aspect of this dissolution of boundaries, when energy *leaks* out of the organismic system.

The more we deal with subtle energies, instead of denying them, the more we need grounding and in this way, the experience of cosmic contact may be increased. It is inevitable that someone feeling insecure, will defend himself also with the energetic field, which is a primitive defense and relates to the eye block. Some people kill themselves, others go crazy, but the survivors can contribute a lot to mankind. Even those who do not survive like Lady Di... are contributing somehow. We may see this moment as an important phase in the evolution of mankind.

Has anyone here seen the movie *Indomitable Genius*, with Robin Williams acting as a therapist treating a young man who was a genius in mathematics, but who had been sentenced for fights and law violations? This movie appeared in February 1998 and soon became a success. The boy defeats several therapists with his invasive questions and his verbal aggressiveness. The difference between Robin Williams and his previous therapists is that he does not hide behind a narcissistic image. He exposes himself, and allows himself to be touched and modified by the patient. Then in the transference may happen the essential experiences that had been missing in the young man's childhood: trust, respect, acceptance of limits, until a positive identification develops and the boy desires the affection of the older man. Consequently there is a strengthening of the ego, the boy recognizes his own value and feels the desire of a love relationship with a woman. Before that he could make sex but was unable of establishing a love connection to another human being.

What surges up then in the field of Bioenergetics?

In 1990, Lowen published *The Spirituality of the Body*. After having exhausted the exploration of one extreme, the belief that all problems were a defense against sexuality, he now could proceed in his search and introduced in therapy the other polarity, spirituality. That means to acknowledge and to start the study of invisible energies, which he no more considered as a schizoid pathology. Moving into the field of spirituality Lowen was as ever before accomplishing his mission: to give grounding and to give

a structure to theories and practices in psychotherapy. He writes in 1990: "...human being is a creature sexually differentiated in every cell of his body... In the same way, spirituality is a function of the whole body. Spirituality dissociated from sexuality becomes an abstraction, and sexuality dissociated from spirituality becomes a mere physical action. This dissociation is caused by the isolation of the heart, and it destroys the connection between the upper and lower part of the body."

This fact that we are living through an accelerated process of evolution and that we are now more aware of energetic fields makes us look towards the opposite energetic pole, the pole opposite to the sexual, our contact with cosmic energy, our sense of spirituality. In order to move safely on in the present evolutionary phase of mankind, in our search of the unifying contact, we shall need even more grounding, centering, flowing, pulsating, acknowledging and expressing the feelings of love, with an open heart and manifesting our personal truth. All these truths that Dr. Lowen, following his mission, organized and taught, creating theories and methods to enable people to acquire these abilities.

I leave you now with this thought: the creation of a new life is the unique miracle that is always happening. With this new life, we are preparing for the challenges of the future. I believe that only love heals, while we are living the excitement of creation and of discovery.

Bibliography

Cornell, William F., *If Reich had met Winnicott*, in "Energy & Character," vol. 2. 1997.

Jacques, Robert, *Narcissism: Pathology or Deficiency*. Manual of the Pacific Northwest Bioenergetic Conference, 1987.

Johnson, Stephen, *Humanizing the Narcissistic Style*. Norton & Norton, 1987

Lowen, Alexander, *Narcissism, The Denial of the True Self*, New York, MacMillan, 1983

Lowen, Alexander, *Ego, Character and Sexuality*, Paper, 1987

Lowen, Alexander, *Back to Basics*, Paper, 1987

Lowen, Alexander, *A Espiritualidade do Corpo*, Cultrix, 1990

Lowen, Alexander, *Alegria*, Summus, 1995.

Mahler, Margareth et al., *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*, Londres, Karnac, 1975.

Robbins, Ronald, *O Tao da Transformação*, Editorial Psy, 1990. (In English: Rhythmic Integration)

This paper was presented at the III Seminar of Body Therapies in Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil, 1998—published in *Revista Reichiana*, nr. 8, 1999 in Portuguese.