From Our Readers

Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis

Embodied Emotions as Seen Through a 21st-Century Lens

Dear Editorial Team,

I am writing to you about a recently published article in the journal titled *Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis* by Leah Benson. This article, unfortunately, has several misstatements and mistakes.

The paper introduces "Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis," drawing heavily from Bioenergetic Analysis (BA), yet misinterprets key concepts. Alexander Lowen, a founder of BA, defines five character structures – Schizoid, Oral, Narcissistic, Masochistic, and Rigid – emerging during the generally understood specific formative periods of 0~3, 1~18, 8~24, 24~48, and 36~72 months, respectively. The author's modifications of these structures are presented without adequate justification, raising concerns about accuracy.

The section on character structure is incorrect and misleading, and statements that are the pillars of Lowenian bioenergetics are attributed to the author – for example, self-awareness, self-expression, and self-possession. These are taken directly from Lowen without giving him credit. I am a member of the editorial board of the journal *International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis* (*IIBA*), and on the peer review board of the *IBPJ*. If this paper had been sent to me for review, I would have caught these issues. They bring down the quality of our journal. These mistakes and misstatements could have been avoided in revisions and subsequent edits.

The paper also offers an unclear and unsupported discussion of emotions. It conflates emotions, feelings, and affects, neglecting the established distinctions of emotions as body states (e.g., joy or fear), feelings as subjective experiences of emotions, and affects as outward expressions of these states. These misrepresentations, among others, contribute to broader conceptual confusion within the text.

In summary, while Bioenergetic Analysis remains a neurobiologically grounded, relational somatic psychotherapy that integrates bodily, analytic, and energetic dimensions, this paper introduces Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis in a manner that significantly diverges from its foundational principles without providing adequate justification.

I would like, with all due respect, to suggest that papers on Bioenergetic Analysis and/or closely related fields should include me as a reviewer. I would like to keep the quality of our *Journal* high and make sure that mistakes and misstatements are caught before the papers are published.

Best wishes,
Homayoun Shahri, PhD, MA, CBT, LMFT

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Response to Homayoun Shahri

This paper (Benson, 2024) introduces not "Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis" per se, but the term *bioenergetic psychoanalysis* as a way to distinguish the practice of Bioenergetic Analysis with a depth-oriented focus from Bioenergetic Analysis with a symptom-oriented focus. This distinction was specifically noted in the first paragraph of the article.

That said, the opinion of the commenter that I attributed the concepts of self-awareness, self-expression, and self-possession to myself assumes that I am distinguishing Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis as something novel and of-my-own, rather than designating a specific way that many clinicians orient themselves as they practice Bioenergetic Analysis. As noted above, I am not claiming to have introduced a new form of Bioenergetic Analysis. I state in the first paragraph that Lowen developed Bioenergetic Analysis. The concepts of self-awareness, self-expression and self-possession, and their phrasing in that order, are well known to be Lowen's, and he is referenced in the bibliography.

With regard to the assertion that I misinterpreted key concepts of Bioenergetic Analysis, developmental periods of character structure are the only specific misinterpretation noted, so I will address this concern.

I contend that while Lowen may have located the development of character structures in the "specific formative periods of 0~3, 1~18, 8~24, 24~48, and 36~72 months," human physical and cognitive development proceeds with variation. Character structures are not essences with fingerprints that can be located or shown to develop specifically during the above noted "formative periods." Character is phenomenological and diagnostic, not neurobiological or physiological. No character structure has been empirically demonstrated to be mapped to a specific body state, brain pattern, or cognition in every instance. As in all development, variation is the norm.

In addition, Lowen's inferences about the development of specific cognitions and emotional states that correspond to physical development are just that – inferences. There are no empirical studies of character structure that justify a rigid coherence to Lowen's specific designations of formative periods, body types, or specific cognitions and emotions.

I presented character structures with a view of them through the lens of 21st-century cognitive science. Specifically, the modifications I made relate to the capacity for conceptual categorization as it proceeds in development. For example, babies are known to acquire a sophistication in their ability to conceptually categorize as early as three months of age (Vouloumanos & Waxman, 2014; Ferry et al., 2013), but not before. This would justifiably place the beginning of the oral phase of character development at three months of age, not one month. In addition, the specific content of conceptualizations that children make during different phases of physical development can be understood only in the context of their culture. For intrapsychic aspects of character structure to follow the specific conceptualizations that Lowen hypothesized, traits of character structure would require rote conceptual categorizations of experience across all cultures. Again, there are no empirical studies of character structure or cognition to justify his ideas, or his "specific formative periods," as unquestionable.

Since the modern neurobiological understanding of conceptual categorization and its unfolding in development came at the end of Lowen's life and afterward, it makes sense that he relied on ideas of cognitive development and intrapsychic models from the 19th and 20th centuries in his writings. That does not make them correct today in the face of new evidence. My justification for modifying the developmental timelines of these structures is derived from review and synthesis of current cognitive science, including predictive processing and active inference literature, as cited in the bibliography.

I will next respond to the claims that the paper "offers an unclear and unsupported discussion of emotions," and that "it conflates emotions, feelings, and affects, neglecting established distinctions: emotions as body states (e.g., joy or fear), feelings as subjective experiences of emotions, and affects as outward expressions of these states."

Respectfully, I believe that the commenter's "broad conceptual confusion" comes not from an "unclear and unsupported discussion of emotions" in the article, but from the use of a different and empirically superseded theoretical perspective. For reference, Appendix A describes the 21st-century view of brain function and emotion set forth in this article. A review of the bibliography of the commenter's own article (Shahri, 2022) includes Damasio, and appears to be the source of the "established distinctions" he noted. To be clear, I reject Damasio's view of emotions, feelings, and affect. Too much evidence refutes the somatic marker hypothesis of emotion for me to accept it.

Specifically, while emotions may be "body states (e.g., joy or fear)," a vast body of literature debunks the idea that there has ever been an emotion that maps to a specific body state, brain pattern, or facial expression (Barrett et al., 2019). The location of emotions in the body cannot be repeated in experiments with consistency or reliability. Instead, variation is the norm. As one of the top 0.1% most-cited scientists in the field of affective neuroscience says, in paraphrase, for every study that claims to find a specific location of an emotion, many more suggest otherwise.

In addition, the idea of "feelings as subjective experiences of emotions" loses coherence when conceptual categorization is meaningfully understood. In today's mathematically-based cognitive neuroscience framework, feeling and emotion, along with cognition and behavior, are considered conceptual categorizations. The article specifies this explanation, and the bibliography cites its references to predictive processing and active inference.

Finally, the assertion that affects are "outward expressions" of emotions and feeling states appears to indicate a use of the term "affect" in its general meaning, rather than in the meaning used in this article. The general meaning of the term "affect" does indeed describe the phenomenological expression of emotions and feelings. However, in this

article, the term "affect" has a specific 21st-century meaning, as noted in the provided reference (Russell & Barrett, 1999), and in numerous other provided citations from the current predictive processing and active inference literature. Affect, in this 21st-century sense, is the general feeling of how energetically aroused, and how good or bad the body-mind system feels at any given time. These are known as the dimensions of core affect, and are referred to as arousal and valence.

In summary, in no way was I taking ownership of Alexander Lowen's ideas and phrases, nor was I misrepresenting them. As the title suggests, I was looking at them through a 21st-century lens. In addition, rather than diminishing its quality, I contend that by referencing, synthesizing, and explaining in simple terms the modern, widely accepted, computationally-derived cognitive neuroscientific framework of emotion, cognition, and behavior known as predictive processing and active inference, the quality of this journal is elevated. Finally, I invite anyone experiencing broad conceptual confusion around the framework to familiarize themselves with the article references and the 4E Cognition discussed in the compelling *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* interview of Giovanna Colombetti (Selvam, 2024).

Leah Benson, LMHC

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