

# Body Psychotherapy Past and Future

Luisa Barbato

## ABSTRACT

Body psychotherapy is almost 100 years old, and extensive research and a wide-ranging variety of clinical practices have supported its development. What are the common points between its different orientations? What are the recent scientific discoveries that validate its clinical experience? What are the new clinical practices? The author gives an initial overview of these important questions.

**Keywords:** body psychotherapy, functionalism, holism, integration, neuroscience, mindfulness

Received: 25.09.2020

Revised: 12.10.2020

Accepted: 21.10.2020

International Body Psychotherapy Journal  
The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis

Volume 19, Number 2,

Fall/Winter 2020/2021, pp. 13-16

ISSN 2169-4745 Printing, ISSN 2168-1279 Online

© Author and USABP/EABP. Reprints and  
permissions: secretariat@eabp.org



## The Beginning of Body Psychotherapy

Until a few decades ago, talking about body psychotherapy was almost heresy. For years, the descendants of Wilhelm Reich were treated kind of like sorcerers who did strange things with the body – half shamans and half practitioners. The image of *official* psychology was anchored to classical psychoanalysis: to the couch, to dreams, to interpretations.

Gradually, things have changed, and today there is an increasing interest in body psychotherapy. Above all, there are now very few models of psychotherapy that do not try to include the body in their practices of introspection and in their analytic paths.

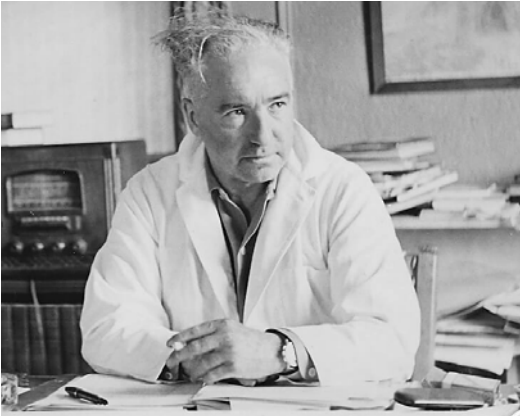
Why is the body so important in the connection to our interiority?

By no means trivial, this question, which goes beyond the realm of body psychotherapy, has elicited hundreds of answers. It was first asked thousands of years ago all over the Earth as humans began to explore their interiority, when this line of inquiry was still the domain of religion and philosophy. Those who searched within themselves invariably met the body. Asian cultures aside, at the dawn of our Western civilization, the ancient Latins wrote: “Mens sana in corpore sano,” declaring that a healthy psyche cannot exist without a healthy body.

Wilhelm Reich, founder of modern body psychotherapy, did not discover anything new, but his merit was in connecting the ancient body-centered traditions with the nascent modern psychology emerging in the work of Freud and his successors.

As body psychotherapists, how do we answer the question: Why the body? We are embodied, because our aliveness cannot be ignored even as we strenuously attempt to deny it. Our material, corporal dimension somehow gives consistency to something that otherwise would be impalpable, inconsistent: our life. For this reason, I am convinced that sooner or later, modern psychology could not have continued to ignore the dimension of the body.

“  
*Neuroscience has revolutionized  
our knowledge and  
we can say that the official validation  
of body psychotherapy  
has come precisely from neuroscience.*”



Wilhelm Reich

Reich postulated a fundamental concept: that functionalism – or functional unity – is the inextricable interrelation between mind and body. He understood this concept not as a connection between the two, not that what we feel and think has an impact on the body, or vice-versa. For example, if I am sad, my body will probably get sick, or, on the contrary, if I spend a lovely day in the mountains, I will feel more cheerful and relaxed psychologically. No, even the most orthodox doctors now agree. Reich meant something deeper – namely that the mind, the psyche is matter, that the body is made up of impulses, also of nervous impulses. In summary, Reich meant that body and mind are the same thing; they are one.

The concept of functionalism has been refined, and has currently evolved into two main lines of thinking:

1. The systemic approach as expression of complex thinking, a deeply psychosomatic understanding in which body, emotions, mind, and spirit are different experiences of our oneness. This is very different from the holistic New Age concept that everything is indiscriminately “one.”
2. An integrated approach that attempts to combine the different aspects of body and mind.

The systemic approach is unitary and intrinsic to the body psychotherapy tradition. The integrated approach is clearly used by the models of psychotherapy that do not have the investigation of the body in their theoretical tradition. They therefore try to integrate it into their already consolidated psychic knowledge.

After all, Reich, who was first a psychoanalyst and one of Freud’s best students and collaborators, began his work by attempting to integrate the body into psychoanalytic knowledge and practice. However, this path led him to thinking that in reality the human being is, on one side, a vibrant nucleus of energy with a center – a core – that constitutes the soul, the spiritual or energetic part, or the bodily self. On the other side, the human being is also a corporeal periphery that interacts with the world. All the components – matter, energy, vital impulses, emotions, thoughts – are included in this vibration of

the being. The more the self is connected with the periphery in a continuous energetic exchange, the more the human being is vital and “healthy.”

## Different Orientations

The history of body psychotherapy, almost 100 years of research and clinical activity, can be read in the light of these concepts, in their assimilation and evolution. In the field of body psychotherapy, recent decades have seen the great development of a multitude of approaches, schools, and specializations, often with little exchange between them. I would like to mention some of the major approaches: Lowen’s *Bionergetics*, Pierrakos’ *Core Energetics*, Boyesen’s *Biodynamics*, Liss’ *Biosystemics*, Boadella’s *Biosynthesis*, Rispoli’s *Functionalism*, Kurtz’s *Hakomi*, Downing’s *Development and Interaction*, Navarro and Ferri’s *Character Analytic Vegetotherapy*.

Each of these schools developed its own epistemology, emphasizing some aspects of clinical intervention and research such as character structures, contact, energy flow, and a transpersonal paradigm. We might then ask ourselves what unites these sometimes radically different schools? Is there still a common denominator in body psychotherapy that is not a superficial attempt to include the body, as is now the trend?

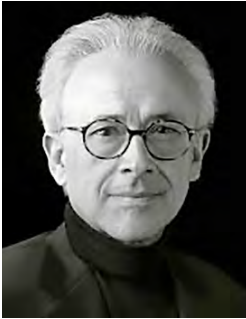
Yes, there is if we consider that the common underlying ground must always be anchored in the original Reichian concept of functionalism.

## The New Factors

Recent years have seen interesting new developments that have revolutionized our research and clinical practices. I refer to two great factors: the discoveries of neuroscience and the inclusion of meditation practices.

Neuroscience has revolutionized our knowledge and we can say that the official validation of body psychotherapy has come precisely from neuroscience. The main clinical discoveries of body psychotherapy have in fact been scientifically proven by neuroscience. It is of great satisfaction for us to observe that what we know from decades of clinical observation, of empirical working with our patients, I would say most humbly, today rise to the fore through the neuroscientific observations.

Damasio “discovered” that the primary self is “corporeal.” Panksepp highlighted the importance of emotional circuits in constitution our emotionality. He showed that our primary core identity does not reside in the most evolved mind, in the neocortex, but in the depths of the reptilian brain, which is instinctive, primitive, and preverbal. Porges demonstrated the functioning of the neuro-vegetative system and the alternating vagal and sympathetic systems. In this regard, we recall how Reich initiated a clinical practice he called vegeto-therapy, which was based precisely on the responses of the neuro-vegetative system.



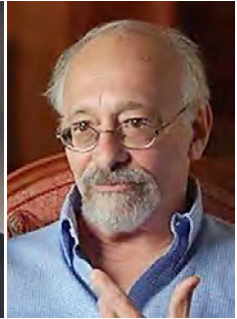
Antonio Damasio



Jack Panksepp



Steven Porges



Allan Schore

And what about neuropsychanalysis? Schore brought to light that the child's mental development is bodily, that the development of the two cerebral hemispheres are structured through the primary attachment relationship with the mother.

All these discoveries, part of science's ongoing evolution, allow us to be more precise in our clinical work. We better understand, not only how we can use bodily activation to trigger emotions and memories, but also what areas of the brain and nervous system we are activating, and which hormonal and neurotransmitter responses are being stimulated.

And now, we come to the second development of recent years which widens the spectrum covered by body psychotherapy from the physical, emotional, mental, and existential to include the transpersonal or spiritual components of our interiority. We can summarize this as an opening to include meditation practice in our clinical work, so that meditation becomes a tool for knowledge and personal healing. The hypothesis is that the human being has subtle components that ancient traditions have cultivated, such as spirituality and religiosity – components made of silence, self-observation, openness to the universe, and transcendence of the ego. More generally, we speak of our relationship with the "sacred" as a spiritual dimension existing first of all within us.

Thus, according to the canons of psychotherapy, after having worked so hard to find, unify, and strengthen the ego, the path of knowledge and inner evolution comes to a point where this ego is finally transcended to make room for a new level of consciousness – to merge with the whole universe. Here too, nothing is really new. At

the end of his career, which was unfortunately cut short to soon, Reich had written about the possibility of letting go of the moorings of one's beliefs and personal identifications to arrive at total contact with the sea of orgone energy of which the entire universe is made, and in which we are constantly immersed.

### Then and Now

So, what is the difference between then and now? Perhaps it is that mindfulness has allowed present-day Western culture to discover meditation, and readily integrate it into many psychotherapeutic approaches. But it is only with body psychotherapy that the evolution of the individual is fully seen within the whole spectrum of the living – from the physical to the spiritual, in a unity that is *functional*. At advanced levels of inner knowledge, as the subtle planes reverberate on the physical-bodily level, it is somehow possible to *spiritualize* matter. This might sound like science fiction, but we can learn to perceive a fully embodied level of consciousness.

Reich's final books tell us about this possibility: that energy is simultaneously matter and consciousness, that the union with the universal orgone energy allows us to make our matter, our body, aware. This continues to be difficult to understand and experience and it is perhaps for this reason that Reich's final writings are still so difficult to understand – even today, almost a century after his life. But in this oneness of matter, energy, and consciousness lies our unification as body psychotherapists, of our spirituality, and of its contemporary secular version represented by mindfulness.



**Luisa Barbato** is a certified Reichian body psychotherapist. She is a board member and supervisor for the Italian Society of Reichian Analysis (SIAR) and director of the scientific committee of the Italian Association of Body Psychotherapy (AIPC). She is an elected member of the Italian Psychologists Professional Association, and chair of the executive committee of the Forum of European Accredited Body Psychotherapy Training Institutes. She works as a body psychotherapist in Rome, where she sees individuals and groups privately and in institutions and teaches body psychotherapy in numerous Italian post-graduate schools of psychotherapy.

## REFERENCES

- Barbato L. (2011).** *Il viaggio analitico nell'analisi reichiana: dal corpo alla coscienza, in Il nostro mare affettivo, la psicoterapia come viaggio.* Rome: Alpes Italia.
- Boadella D., Liss J. (1986).** *La psicoterapia del corpo.* Rome: Astrolabio.
- Boyesen G., Gerome P. (2018).** *Entre psyche et soma (ne): introduction à la psychologie biodynamique.* Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot.
- Cloninger, C.R. (1994).** The genetic structure of personality and learning: a phylogenetic perspective. *Clinical Genetics*, 46, 124-137.
- Cloninger, C.R. (1999).** *Personality and psychopathology.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press.
- Damasio, A.R. (2010).** *Self comes to mind: Constructing the conscious brain.* London: William Heinemann, Random House.
- Damasio, A.R., Grabowski, T.J., Bechara, A., Damasio, H., Ponto, L.L.B., Parvizi, J. & Hichwa, R.D. (2000).** Subcortical and cortical brain activity during the feeling of self-generated emotions, *Nature Neuroscience*, 3 (10), pp. 1049-1056.
- Ferri G., Cimini G. (1999).** Analytical setting: time, relation and complexity. *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences*, 857, June 1999.
- Kabat-Zinn, J., Massion, A.O., Kristeller, J., Peterson, L.G., Fletcher, K.E., Pbert, L., Lenderking, W.R., Santorelli, S.F. (1992).** Effectiveness of a meditation-based stress reduction program in the treatment of anxiety disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 149 (7):936-943.
- Kurtz, R. (2007).** *Body-centered psychotherapy: The Hakomi Method.* Mendocino, CA: LifeRhythm Books.
- Laszlo, E. (1996).** *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time (Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences).* New York: Hampton Press.
- Lowen A. (1975).** *Bioenergetics (It. tr. Bioenergetica (1983).* Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Navarro F. (1988).** *La somatopsicodinamica.* Pescara: Discobolo.
- Montecucco N.F. (1997).** The unity of consciousness, synchronization and the collective dimension. *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution* (48), 141-150.
- Panksepp J, Biven, L. (2012).** *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotion.* New York: W. W. Norton.
- Pert C. (1999).** *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Between Mind-Body Medicine.* New York: Scribner.
- Pierrakos J.C. (1990).** *Core Energetics: Developing the Capacity to Love and Heal.* Mendocino: Life Rhythm Books.
- Reich W. (1933).** *Character Analysis, (It. tr. Analisi del carattere.* Milan: Sugarco).
- Reich W. (1948).** *Function of the Orgasm (Discovery of the Orgone, Vol.1). (It. tr. La funzione dell'orgasmo.* Milan: Sugarco (1969).
- Rispoli L. (2008).** *The Basic Experiences and the Development of the Self: Development from the point of view of Functional Psychotherapy.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Schore, A. N. (2003a).** *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self.* New York: W. W. Norton.
- Schore, A. N. (2003b).** *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self.* New York: W. W. Norton.
- Segal, Z., Teasdale, J., Williams, M. (2002).** *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression.* New York: Guilford Press.
- Sen I. (1986).** *Integral Psychology.* Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education.