ABSTRACT

Body psychotherapy in Hungary has a relatively short history, as the repressive political environment did not allow any substantive contact with Western developments in the field before the 1990s. Over the past three decades, there has been a growing presence of various body-oriented schools of psychotherapy in Hungary. This paper provides a brief introduction to the training model currently applied in the Hungarian Institute for Body Psychotherapy, as well as a range of related activities offered primarily through the Hungarian Association for Body Psychotherapy.

Keywords: body psychotherapy, Sándor Ferenczi, Hungarian Association for Body Psychotherapy (HABP), Hungarian Institute for Body Psychotherapy (HIBP), Hungary

Márton Szemerey

Body Psychotherapy in Hungary

Historical Context

Body psychotherapy in Hungary has a relatively short history spanning less than two decades. Despite its relatively recent emergence, Hungary has a long tradition of paying attention to somatic aspects of psychological healing, with roots reaching back to the 1920s. That was when Sándor Ferenczi, a close colleague of Freud, enthusiastic student of Georg Groddeck, and mentor to Wilhelm Reich (Downing, 1996), originated a body-oriented approach to mental disorders. Many of Ferenczi’s technical innovations and theoretical insights have thus been present among Hungarian psychotherapists for almost a hundred years.

However, efforts to maintain and further refine Ferenczi’s concepts after his early death in 1933 remained sporadic for a rather lengthy period. The vicissitudes faced by the country during the 20th century have allowed little space for any systematic, long-lasting study of bodily features in the psychotherapeutic process. First, there was the far-right radicalization of the political milieu lasting until the end of Second World War, and then the communist takeover in 1949 created an atmosphere in successive totalitarian governments characterized by an intense distrust of psychotherapy in general, accompanied by an ensuing repression of the entire profession throughout the Cold War era. For the same reason, the years our country was behind the Iron Curtain were spent in nearly complete isolation from the streams of global progress in psychotherapy, including those in the burgeoning field of body psychotherapy in the west. Some of the highly esteemed figures making ample contributions during that period, like Stanley Keleman, Ana Veronica Mautner and Sándor Pethő, were immigrants of Hungarian origin, but apparently, they had no connection to the country either. In contrast to this void, the democratic turn of the early 1990s resulted in a permisive legislative and bureaucratic environment, welcoming vigorous growth in the helping professions in both the academic...
and clinical areas. Among many others, it enabled the multifaceted legacy left by the Budapest School of Psychoanalysis to gain attention once again, shedding light on the Ferenczian approach as well.

The Beginnings: from ÉEPSSA to HAPB

It was against the above backdrop that body psychotherapy began its appearance in Hungary in the early 2000s. It must be noted that there were occasional contacts with certain schools of body psychotherapy from the late 1980s, with the only true exception among these short-lived attempts being the successful implementation of Focusing. Gendlin’s modality has been present in Hungary since the early 1990s and is the best-known of the schools mentioned below.

However, it was chiefly the cooperation with the École Européenne de Psychotérapié Socio- et Somato-Analytique (ÉEPSSA; Lipsheim, France) that proved to be the decisive impact in the formation of a clearly body-oriented section within the broader community of Hungarian professional helpers. In 2004, a group began training with Dr. Richard Meyer and his colleagues in ÉEPSSA, paying regular visits to Lipsheim, and attending workshops by the French school in Budapest.

At a certain point, some participants decided to establish an umbrella organization to coordinate the growing number of activities related to body psychotherapy. In 2008, their efforts culminated in the foundation of the Hungarian Association for Body Psychotherapy (HABP). Its aim is to officially represent somatic psychology and body-oriented branches of psychotherapy in Hungary.

For a few more years, HABP members continued to be closely connected to the various training programs offered by ÉEPSSA. Over time, however, HABP got in touch with trainers and body psychotherapists from other institutes on the international scene. By early 2010s, in addition to the numerous weekend workshops held in Budapest by professionals from all over Europe, full-length training programs were launched with trainers from Belgium, Croatia, Italy, and other countries. After a vivid and colorful initial period of searching boldly for new developments in the world of body psychotherapy, the field gradually settled down. So far, four modalities have established themselves in Hungary firmly enough to offer regularly new training groups, and develop a team of Hungarian trainers and assistants:

1. Biosystemic Psychotherapy (Società Italiana di Biosistematica, Bologna, Italy)
2. Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy (The International Focusing Institute, New York, U.S.)
3. Haptonomy (École Européenne de Psychothérapie Socio- et Somato-Analytique, Lipsheim, France)
4. Integrative Core Dynamics (Centar za Integrativni Razvoj, Zagreb, Croatia)

Next Steps: HIBP and its Mixed Model of Training

By 2013, it became clear that the scope of HABP had grown to where it needed to become a professional training institute, possibly accredited by the Hungarian state and international organizations. Therefore, a general framework for a body psychotherapy training was designed to meet the standards of the European Association for Body Psychotherapy (EABP) and the Hungarian Council of Psychotherapy (HCP). This training was launched in 2014. However, in 2016, with the EABP Forum accreditation underway, it was suggested that trainings should be separate from HABP, because it is an association with a much broader range of activities (see below) than a conventional training institute. Therefore, the Hungarian Institute for Body Psychotherapy (HIBP) was founded in 2018 to organize body psychotherapy trainings.

The training program presently offered by the HIBP relies on the understanding that the different modalities of body psychotherapy, including those currently active in Hungary, emphasize rather different aspects of therapeutic work and rely on different theoretical assumptions. However, since they all define themselves as belonging to body psychotherapy, a common ground for professionals representing these modalities is needed.

The mixed model presented briefly below can be regarded as a tentative response to the dilemma of representing different modalities under an umbrella organization, while still wanting to offer a training that is unified at least in the fundamental aspects outlined by professional bodies like EABP and HCP. After extensive debate, it was decided that 1) the training processes of all four modalities should be upgraded to meet the above-mentioned standards, and 2) a separate course offering a firm and broad general theoretical background should be available to any trainee wishing to enter even deeper the field of body psychotherapy. This way, each modality can continue to be respected as a distinct tradition, while trainees can opt to acquire further knowledge about body psychotherapy beyond the boundaries of their chosen modality.

Even though such modality-specific limitations may be hard to grasp, it seems essential to address them. Most HIBP core members have completed trainings in multiple modalities, both within and outside of body psychotherapy. Our experience shows that the longer a modality has been in existence, the more it tends to lose flexibility and balance. Despite its trainers’ best intentions, the tight schedule during a training and the insistence on a specific professional point of view can contribute to a distorted presentation of body psychotherapy. In addition, there are cases where deficient training is due to a lack of knowledge about the latest findings, or an unwillingness to acknowledge them. This can easily result in trainees receiving a narrow, and occasionally even questionable or outdated, view of
body psychotherapy. An important function of the HIBP module on general theory is to overcome limitations of this sort without harming the integrity of the distinct modalities.

As a result, students have the option to train in the modality of their choice and end their studies at any stage, as has always been the case. Full HIBP training means that the trainee must complete an entire course of training in at least one modality as defined by EABP — from personal psychotherapeutic experience to supervision within the same modality — as well as attend the training in the general theory of body psychotherapy. Depending on the chosen modality, the number of hours needed to complete the four sections from personal experience to supervision can vary between 800 and 1,300. The theoretical module lasts an additional 400 hours and covers a vast range of subjects in a systematic manner, ranging from the history of body psychotherapy and its many modalities to the somatic aspects of developmental psychology and psychopathology, including theories of embodiment, body-centered transference dynamics, research methodology, and the ethics of touch, to name just a few. Trainees wishing to attend both the training in a modality and the theoretical module are encouraged to enroll in them simultaneously in order to graduate in four years. There is an oral examination at the end of a theoretical module, whereas the four-year-long full training ends with a written case study along with some minor requirements.

In one of his recent books, Nick Totton ponders the difficulties that confront body psychotherapy trainings in the 21st century. In a remarkable passage, he writes:

The fight to gain recognition across Europe has meant that EABP has worked towards a considerable level of standardisation of BP training — a total shift from the old dispensation where different modalities had completely distinct systems, theories, and training methods. To gain EAP recognition, trainings must conform to a universal model, a master’s-level four-year part-time course; there is also strong pressure for integration and common curricula, to the extent that some schools offer a generic training in body psychotherapy. I think there is enough discussion in this book of the diversity within BP to thoroughly problematise the idea of a generic training, which I suggest would mean leaving out entirely a great deal of BP’s most creative work. A lot of one thing, a little bit of everything, or a sort of generalised fudge? These are to some degree always the three choices for a psychotherapy training. (Totton, 2020, p. 88)

To the best of my understanding, the mixed training model currently offered by HIBP has some capacity to avoid the extremes of the one-sided approaches described by Totton. Training in a modality does mean learning “a lot of one thing,” yet the immense theoretical knowledge of somatic approaches, accrued in the last hundred years, means learning “a little bit of everything.” Such a simultaneous microscopic and panoramic view does not necessarily take the shape of a “generalised fudge.” Obviously, this form of mixed training is far from being a panacea for the problems raised by Totton, but it must be possible to find the right balance between supporting distinct modalities and providing trainees with a solid foundation in body psychotherapy by giving them a thorough introduction to the comprehensive theories that embody the common ground of the field.

This autumn, a fourth group of students began the theoretical module. The material now included is a greatly modified version of the one presented to the first training group in 2014. Year by year, the content is carefully adjusted according to feedback from both participants and lecturers, and this process of refinement is expected to continue for a long time. So far, experience shows several advantages to inviting students with backgrounds in different modalities. Conversations about clinical cases and problematic situations in the therapeutic process are stimulating and refreshing. Participants often share information about how their respective modality approaches certain forms of psychopathology, or what technical expertise they have when working with the body. They gradually acquire the clinical vocabulary to describe their impressions in a more precise way that is also intelligible for those training in other modalities. They often report that their experiences and skills become more integrated when reconsidering them from the bird’s eye view of the newly discussed theoretical perspectives. The aim of this mixed procedure is not to make trainees less identified with their original modality, but to help them find access to larger territories of body psychotherapy and clinical thinking in general. This endeavor can be thought of as a unique characteristic of HIBP training and, until now, it seems to be a worthwhile effort indeed.

Further Activities of HABP

As mentioned above, HABP was originally established to coordinate the growing number of activities related to body psychotherapy in Hungary. That goal has remained the same. The following list informs the reader about some of the pursuits that have occupied members of the association since 2008.

1. Translation of publications related to body psychotherapy

Many Hungarian trainees cannot fluently read literature in English, German, French, or other foreign languages. Until this changes substantially, it is crucial that high-quality texts about body psychotherapy be made available in Hungarian. Some of the books published so far with the contribution of our members as translators, copy editors etc. include:
Márton Szemerey


5. Conducting research about body psychotherapy

As part of this increasing curiosity, a research project about the effectiveness of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy has been under way for several years at the institute of psychology of a university in Budapest.

6. Authoring papers and books about body psychotherapy

Our members regularly represent the association at Hungarian conferences and congresses related to psychology and psychotherapy, and publish articles and book chapters on topics central to body psychotherapy.

7. Editing online journal about body psychotherapy

For some years, HABP has been experimenting with editing an open-access online journal about body psychotherapy in Hungarian. This journal used to be an excellent opportunity both for members to author articles and for translators of shorter papers to get their materials published, but the lack of necessary editorial skills in the association made it rather difficult to maintain the journal in the long run.

8. Application for accreditation to professional organizations

Since 2016, considerable efforts have been made to take steps in the process of accreditation to EABP and Hungarian Council of Psychotherapy, some facets of which were also highlighted in the previous part of the present paper. Currently, HIPB training in body psychotherapy has a partial accreditation from the EABP Forum, with a number of requirements to fulfill in the near future, while the accreditation process in Hungary is under preparation.

Concluding Remarks

Young (2012) makes a strong argument in support of his thesis that body psychotherapy is not a science but a craft. While largely agreeing with this viewpoint, it cannot be overlooked that recent works by Heller (2012), Barratt (2013), Cornell (2015), Totton (2015b), Geuter (2015, 2019) and several other authors delineate highly sophisticated explanations about what body psychotherapy is, making extensive use of scientific concepts to prove the proposed assumptions. These explanations clearly reflect the diversity of the different authors’ opinions. At the same time, in certain fundamental aspects, they tend to blend into a coherent theoretical structure that is recognizable behind the practical work of any body psychotherapist.
In that sense, HABP and HIBP can be said to be oriented first and foremost toward presenting the art-like craft of body psychotherapy, along with its theoretical background, to the extent it can be articulated today. Apart from the complex situation recounted above, our ambition is also fueled by the fact that the latest changes in the legislative environment of psychotherapy in Hungary require training institutes to become increasingly professional, stressing the importance of scientific and theoretical verification of therapeutic modalities.

The pandemic, beginning in 2020, has presented our community with a serious challenge. It has disrupted our organizational life as well, but we are planning to restart most of our usual activities soon.

◼◼◼

Psychotherapy in Hungary

Márton Szemerey, MA, is a body psychotherapist in private practice in Budapest, Hungary. He is a full member of the EABP.

REFERENCES