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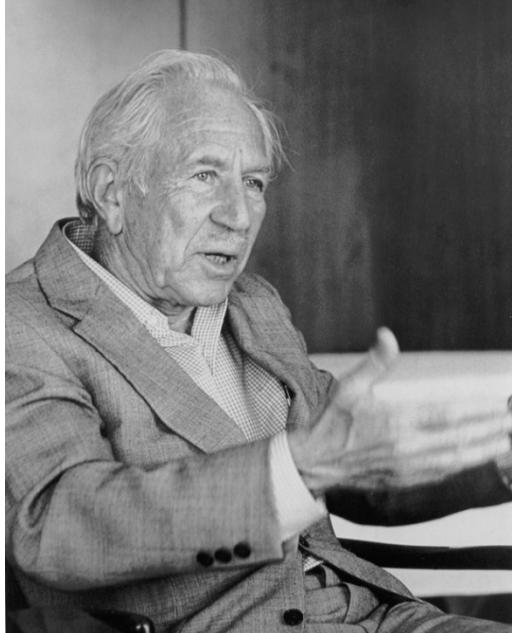
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USABP Mission Statement

The USABP believes that integration of the body and the mind is essential to effective psychotherapy, and to that end its mission is to develop and advance the art, science, and practice of body psychotherapy in a professional, ethical, and caring manner in order to promote the health and welfare of humanity.



*Alexander Lowen, M.D.
Dec. 23, 1910-Oct. 28, 2008*

A student of Wilhelm Reich's in the 1940s and early 1950s he developed a form of body psychotherapy known as Bioenergetic Analysis with his then-colleague, John Pierrakos.



Bioenergetic Analysis in the College Classroom

Peter S. Fernald

Abstract

A strictly conceptual, non-experiential presentation of Bioenergetic analysis in the college classroom risks the possibility of inaccuracy, of failing to underscore the importance of body-level understanding in Bioenergetics. On the other hand, having students engage in Bioenergetic exercises can put students' sense of dignity and self-worth at risk. This dilemma and the teaching strategies used to address it and other related issues are described. When the various ethical and pedagogical challenges described here are adequately handled, teaching Bioenergetics in the college classroom can be a highly satisfying experience for both students and instructor.

Keywords

Bioenergetic Analysis – College Classroom – Bioenergetic Exercises - Ethics

At first, I was confused by Bioenergetics. It seemed like a foreign language ... Then one day in lecture, it hit me ... This year, for the first time in my life, I've felt very anxious ... a lot of guilt about things that never before bothered me ... I have been sick much of the time ... I've also been depressed and cried for seemingly no reason. Speaking Bioenergetically, I've been flooded with feelings ... Although it has been tough, what has happened is good. I am starting to get in touch with who I am (not who I ought to be). I realize I must live my life according to who I am ... Like Lowen describes in his book, I felt I was losing control (and that's scary). But, I realize that this is all very important and necessary. Thanks to Bioenergetics, I know this now!

The above passage, written by a University of New Hampshire (UNH) undergraduate, is one of many I have read in the past 20-plus years, since I began teaching my senior-level Counseling course. Al Lowen's writing and teaching have been an abundantly rich, life-affirming gift for me, my clients, and my students. I feel enormous gratitude for his legacy of Bioenergetic analysis. With much love and appreciation, I dedicate this paper to him.

Ethical Considerations

Psychologists' ethical principles and code of conduct state that, among other goals, psychologists are committed both to promoting accuracy and truthfulness in the teaching of psychology and to increasing people's understanding of themselves and others (American Psychological Association, 2002, p. 1062). According to this assertion, my task as psychology professor is twofold: to teach Bioenergetic analysis (henceforth referred to simply as Bioenergetics) accurately, and to help students better understand themselves and others.

Bioenergetics is an experiential, body-oriented psychotherapy. This orientation perhaps is its most distinctive feature. The self is the body in Bioenergetics, and self-understanding means being aware of one's body, including sensations, feelings, breathing, and tensions. Bioenergetic exercises, which include physical movement and expression, are designed to promote just such understanding. A strictly conceptual or theoretical approach to teaching and learning Bioenergetics that did not include Bioenergetic exercises would provide, in my view, a woefully inaccurate, non-experiential account of Bioenergetics, similar to teaching tennis through lectures and books without ever having the learner swing a racquet and hit a ball. From a Bioenergetic perspective, such pedagogy would do little to promote students' body-oriented understanding of themselves and others.

Still another ethical principle indicates that psychologists take care to do no harm and that they respect the dignity and worth of all individuals (American Psychological Association, 2002, pp. 1062-63). Designed to elicit strong emotions (Lowen and Lowen, 1977), some of the exercises can put students' well being and dignity at risk. Should students enrolling in an undergraduate course in counseling be subjected to these possibilities? A thoughtful, prudent answer to this question requires that we first consider two pedagogical issues: teaching the concepts and teaching the exercises.

Teaching the Concepts

The Counseling course runs for a 14- or 15- week semester with 5 weeks devoted to Bioenergetic analysis, 4 weeks to Rogers's person-centered approach, and 5 weeks to Haley's and Whitaker's family systems. Assigned readings include only primary sources which for the Bioenergetic section is *Joy* (Lowen, 1995). Prompted by the Monte Carlo Quiz method (Fernald, 2004), students regularly come to class having completed the assigned reading and prepared for discussion. Including both conceptual and experiential learning, each 3-hour weekly class addresses one of the following topics: energy, grounding, character, sexuality, and therapy.

Pedagogy and Personhood

Many, if not most, students enroll in the course expecting to learn counseling techniques, a misconception I attempt to dispel at the outset of the course. On the first day of class I hand out the course syllabus, which states my belief—that the personhood of the counselor and the client-counselor relationship, not techniques *per se*, are the *sine qua non* for effective counseling. I also share my belief that professional growth, particularly for counselors, is intimately connected to personal growth, and that a counselor usually cannot guide and/or accompany a client to a level of personal growth he or she (the counselor) has not already attained.

Many of the questions on quizzes and papers require students to relate Bioenergetic concepts to their personhood, that is, to their intra- and interpersonal experiences. My reading of and commenting on their essays reflect this focus. When a student describes a compelling example of how Bioenergetic theory prompts a fuller understanding of him- or herself, for example, I write a comment that supports and encourages such reflection. Many students in the class pursue graduate training and/or careers in some form of counseling. For this reason, an important, though certainly not exclusive, goal of the course is for each student to realize the significance of her or his personhood for possibly someday working as a counselor.

Students' Resistance

Initially, students are fascinated by the holistic, body-mind perspective of Bioenergetic analysis. As they read Lowen's writing, however, they express resistance to Bioenergetic analysis, a resistance that runs high, substantially higher than for the person-centered or family systems approaches. Negative reactions are so strong for some students that their completing the assigned readings in Bioenergetics becomes an onerous task.

The students object to Lowen's writing, which they regard as sexist and redundant, and to his psychoanalytic interpretations and body readings, which they believe are often overly simplistic and of questionable accuracy. Well trained in scientific inquiry, especially experimental research methods, they object to Lowen's using case studies rather than controlled laboratory studies as the basis for his assertions. They also object to the paucity of Lowen's referencing and to his citing primarily either his own or Reich's writing. Agreeing with many of their concerns, I listen respectfully to the students' objections and discuss them as openly as I can.

In an effort to help students both accept and understand their resistances, I acknowledge my resistance years ago to Lowen's writing. I recall how, in the margins of Lowen's books, I wrote expletive-enriched declarations regarding my disagreements with Lowen. With my encouraging them to do likewise, students show signs of relief. Once I sense that students feel supported and safe enough to both have and state their objections, I suggest that they may be doing themselves a disservice if they "throw the baby out with the bathwater." Stating the point more directly, I suggest that Lowen's insights into the human condition may greatly outweigh the various objections they have raised. Having thus stated my position, I encourage the students to open both their minds and bodies to Bioenergetic analysis.

At the beginning of the section on Bioenergetics I stress the distinction between knowledge and understanding (Lowen, 1980). Students readily recognize the distinction and its importance, as many have had more than their fill of knowledge, of "neck up" education. I also indicate my hope that they not simply acquire knowledge of Bioenergetic concepts, but rather that they understand (on a body level) the concepts. Years ago, in the class just after our consideration of this distinction, a student described the following experience, which I later recalled and recorded as nearly verbatim as I could.

I was feeling a little sad the other day. Instead of trying to will myself out of my sadness or figure out the reasons for it, I decided to go with it. I went to my room and just sat there by myself... My eyes became teary, and I began to softly cry... Eventually I broke into deep sobbing that lasted a long time, perhaps an hour or longer. Afterward, I felt better, went out for a short time, returned to my room, and went to bed. I awoke the next morning feeling wonderful and realized I had slept better than I had in quite some time. I still did not know what I had cried about, but later in the morning it came to me. It was a problem I had been unwilling to acknowledge for a long time. Having acknowledged it to myself, I later was able to tell a friend about it. I guess my body understood before my mind knew.

Possessing a here-and-now quality and coming from a peer, not me (the instructor), this example modeled for all students the potential relevance and impact of Bioenergetics. Such examples, I believe, also encourage students to consider how any Bioenergetic concept might pertain to them. As their work with Bioenergetics continues, both the depth of students' sharing and their excitement for Bioenergetics grows.

Teaching About Sexuality

With regard to teaching Bioenergetic theory, however, the topic of sexuality is the most challenging. One might think that with college students the opposite would be true, but I find this not to be the case. Lowen's emphasis on the body, particularly upon sexuality, elicits a good deal of apprehension and resistance in students. I wonder if the students' resistances to Bioenergetics have their source in Lowen's emphasis on sexuality. My lecture on sexuality seems to leave students quiet and

without questions, which is unlike their response to most of my other lectures. In the lecture, I present Lowen's description of contemporary Oedipal tragedies, including pleasure anxiety and other Oedipal sequelae (Lowen, 1980). While students do not react openly to my lecture in the classroom, what they write in their papers is another matter, as the following passage, written by a female student, indicates.

When I read the Oedipus story in literature or mythology classes, I never took it seriously. But, after reading Lowen's view, I began to see the story in a new light. When I was twelve my parents divorced. My father moved out without even saying goodbye. In junior high, high school, and even in college, I always had problems having a relationship with a guy. For a long time I thought something was wrong with me. Then, I began focusing on my relationship with my father, and especially on the day he left both physically and emotionally. I thought maybe his leaving was the sole reason for my failure to have a relationship. But, Lowen's perspective on the Oedipal struggle made me realize there is more to my relationship struggles than my father's leaving...When I was young my father and I were very close. We snuggled and watched T.V. together, and he always kissed me goodnight. It was infantile sexuality...in a normal healthy way. Then, around the age of eight or nine, it all stopped. We no longer snuggled or hugged... I began to feel extremely uncomfortable, such as on holidays or birthdays when we were "forced" to hug. Reading Lowen's description of the Oedipal struggle, I had the realization that my father probably was sexually excited around me and, I imagine, frightened by his excitement. I suspect this was the case as he seemed to have stopped all of his feelings for me. He withdrew from me. I in turn became frightened and ashamed of my sexual feelings. I am still trying to accept that I can feel sexual excitement for and be loved by a man.

Teaching the Exercises

UNH senior psychology majors are well trained in the merits of empiricism which, for them, refers to scientific methods, especially data collection and analysis. Reminding them of the root meaning of empiricism, which concerns experience and the senses, I encourage them to adopt a skeptical, show-me attitude toward Bioenergetic analysis, including Bioenergetic exercises. Engaging in the exercises, they have the opportunity to experience Bioenergetic concepts and principles in their bodies. Let empiricism (i.e., their experiences), I suggest, be the facts. Students seem to be both challenged and motivated by this perspective.

Some Guidelines

My intent in orienting students to the exercises is to create an atmosphere where students can relax, let go, and let down. I explain, emphasize, and re-emphasize that, contrary to other exercise programs which emphasize physical strength, endurance, and "building oneself up," the goal in Bioenergetic exercise classes is to be more in touch with our bodies and feelings. Noting that every student in the class is a unique being, I encourage students to focus exclusively on their own experiences.

I teach the exercises in a slow, gradual progression, proceeding from very little to more and more emotional intensity. The exercises are selected, and occasionally adapted, from those described in The Way to Vibrant Health (Lowen and Lowen, 1977) and Trauma Releasing Exercises (Bercelli, 2003). Expressive exercises are introduced at the second or third class, after students have gained some experience with grounding, breathing, and stretching exercises. Participation is entirely the students' choice. I state clearly that no one should participate for a grade in the course or because of peer pressure and that they may participate selectively, participating in the relaxation-stretching and/or grounding exercises, for example, and not in the expressive exercises. Typically all twenty students, barring those compromised by a medical condition, participate in all of the exercises. Occasionally, one or two students opt not to do the expressive exercises.

Reactions to the Exercises

Following each exercise session, and in small groups, students discuss their reactions to the exercises. Students are surprised, relieved and comforted to discover both that reactions vary greatly and that they are not alone with some of their reactions. These discoveries provide a sense of camaraderie. As their images of being different and 'abnormal' begin to fade, students discover their common humanity. Their comments and questions about the exercises provide opportunities for me to help them integrate conceptual and experiential learning.

For many students the exercises elicit remarkable insights. Engaging in the pelvic lift exercise (Bercelli, 2003), one student noted pelvic and groin tension, which he described as resistance. The experience prompted him to a "troubling awareness" that he is a person who generally finds sexual pleasure on a physical level, not on a loving or emotional level. "According to Alexander Lowen," he writes, "this would be exactly what corresponds to tightness and resistance in the pelvis and groin...I never considered myself sexually inhibited... but this exercise has made me examine my habits regarding sex." In another exercise, the same student reports reaching out for someone (his former girlfriend of two years) who in his mind's eye

does not reach back. This experience prompts the student to realize “something very important... (that) I had refused to surrender to my feelings of sadness and risk the possibility of crying... (which has) made it impossible for me to move on ...”

Though a few students typically are not strongly affected by Bioenergetic analysis, occasionally one or two report breakthroughs. Prompted by engaging in the exercises that encourage the expression of anger, by reading the Chapter “Anger: The Healing Emotion” in *Joy*, and by listening to my lecture on anger, another student became aware of longstanding denial of her hatred of her mother, who had abandoned the family ten years earlier. Finding herself one day in a state of angst and despair, she telephoned her mother. She asked her mother to come for a visit. Once again, even though only a one-hour drive was involved, her mother failed to respond. Unable this time to overlook her mother’s non-response, the student found herself enraged. She called her mother and, for the first time, expressed anger to her mother, and then “sobbed and screamed away years of emotional pain.” Witnessing, also for the first time, her daughter’s pain and tears, the mother’s heart opened to her daughter. Now, after ten years of estrangement, the two enjoy a mutually loving and supportive relationship. Concluding her essay, the student writes, “I tested the concepts of Bioenergetics, found my inner self, and resolved a traumatic past.”

During the Fall semester ’07, at the end of the 5-weeks section focused on Bioenergetic analysis, 19 of the 20 students enrolled in the course completed an inventory containing statements to be rated on a 7-point scale, 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree), and a few questions requiring brief written responses. As is evident in Table 1, the students’ ratings indicated an overall positive endorsement of the exercises. Students’ written remarks were predominantly positive as well. Several students noted that initially they were apprehensive, skeptical, and even critical of the exercises, but that eventually they enjoyed the exercises. A few of the students reported that they experienced energy moving and vibrations as a result of the exercises, that the exercises helped them reduce body tension, and that they learned a great deal about themselves from the exercises. One student clearly and succinctly stated the purpose of the exercises: “It is about opening up and surrendering.”

Risks and Responsibilities

A number of years ago, in the middle of an expressive exercise where students say “I won’t,” a student, whom I shall call Jackie, became upset, ran from the room into the hallway and collapsed sobbing. I went to Jackie’s side, and eventually she talked about what had happened. Then, she added, “They (the other students) must think I’m stupid.” Returning to the class, I told the students that the “I won’t” exercise had triggered some upsetting feelings for Jackie but that now she was feeling more calm. I asked for volunteers to sit with Jackie in the hallway. Four students volunteered. I returned to Jackie and told her that I had asked a few students to join us in the hall. I said that I thought they would be very supportive of her. Jackie seemed comfortable with this plan. In the class, when Jackie and the four students returned, we discussed the incident. A few students indicated their own apprehension about the exercises. Other students said that they respected Jackie for participating so fully.

A Teaching Moment

I believe my personal background in Bioenergetic therapy enabled me to handle the incident reasonably well. Believing that I could help Jackie move through her strong feeling, I was not nervous during the incident. I regularly engaged in Bioenergetic exercises during my many years in Bioenergetic therapy and training, and to this day I often do some of the exercises. The exercises enhance my capacities for accepting, expressing, and containing intense emotions, and thus I was able to be calm during this incident. I modeled, I believe, professional behavior appropriate for a counselor or teacher.

Nonetheless, I might have handled the incident differently than I did. Jackie believed her classmates thought her stupid. My ethical and professional responsibility as instructor was to help preserve Jackie’s sense of self worth and dignity. Acknowledging Jackie’s full participation in the exercises I also might have thanked her for providing such a clear demonstration of the Bioenergetic concept “priming the pump,” which refers to the potential of the exercises to elicit strong feelings. The incident underscores an important principle: there is no correct or right reaction to a Bioenergetic exercise; any reaction is an opportunity for teaching and learning.

Institutional Expectations

Later reflection upon the incident triggered my countertransference and projections. I began to question my major premise, that Bioenergetics could be taught experientially in the college classroom. One of my worst fears, surfaced—that a student would tell a faculty colleague about “the weird exercises Professor Fernald has us do.” I experienced feelings of shame and inferiority. My confidence and sense of self worth were in question.

Wilhelm Reich coined the phrase “emotional plague,” the tendency of institutions and even cultures to curb strong passions and make them taboo (Reich, 1945). Alice Miller describes “poisonous pedagogy,” a manner of teaching that punishes children and adolescents for expressing and even experiencing strong feelings (Miller, 1983). Similar taboos exist in academia and the sciences where the mind, not the body is prized—or, to use Freud’s language, where secondary/mind processes (logic, reason, intellect) are the antidotes to unwanted primary/body processes (emotions, motives, drives). The mind is viewed as an instrument of pure reason. The body and its feelings are suspect at best and to be avoided. Unfortunately and sadly, such

poisonous pedagogy occurs in the academic training of clinical and counseling psychologists (Pope and Tabachnick, 1993). Bioenergetics, with its emphasis on the body and primary processes, runs against the mind-revering grain of academia and science. My sense of shame and diminished confidence was the product of both my characterological disposition and the contra-body culture in which I teach.

Conclusion, No and Yes

At the beginning of this paper, I raised this question: Should college students be encouraged to engage in Bioenergetic exercises, exercises that might trigger intense emotional reactions and challenge students' sense of well being and dignity? Unless the college professor has an understanding and appreciation of Bioenergetic analysis, is trained to lead Bioenergetic exercise classes, and is both aware of and prepared to deal with the pedagogical problems and ethical issues described above, my answer to this question is an emphatic "no."

On the other hand, for the instructor trained in Bioenergetic analysis and sensitive to the risks involved, not to emphasize experiential understanding at a body level would deprive students of some very significant learning experiences. And, the instructor would be deprived of an enormously challenging and exciting teaching experience. This outcome is indeed what has happened for me. Teaching Bioenergetics to college students has kept me and my students very much alive in the classroom. Thank you, Al, for modeling and teaching the precious gift of aliveness.

Table 1
Students Ratings of the Exercises

Item		Mean	SD
1. I felt permission to not participate in (or to modify to my comfort level) any of the exercises.	6.74	.65	
2. The exercises, especially lying over the towel roll, helped me become more aware of my breathing, including the fullness/shallowness of my breathing.	6.05	1.18	
3. The exercises were a waste of time.		2.16	.96
4. The exercises helped me gain some understanding of what it means to be grounded.	5.21	.79	
5. Doing the exercises provided experiential, body-level understanding of Bioenergetic concepts and principles.	6.00	.67	
6. The exercises helped me understand the differences between more traditional talk (verbal) psychotherapies and less traditional body-oriented psychotherapies.	6.11	.74	
7. I recommend that, when the instructor teaches Bioenergetic analysis in the future, the exercises NOT be included.	1.63	.76	

Note. N=20. Ratings are based on a scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree).

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