Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis

Embodied Emotions as Seen Through a 21st-century Lens

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ABSTRACT

Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis (BioPsyA), in alignment with 21st-century science of brain function and emotion, posits that emotion and cognition are functionally indistinguishable and arise from the brain's continuous process of interoception and categorization. Emotions are learned cognitive constructs applied unconsciously to affective states within situated contexts, though emotion construction is not to be mistakenly conflated with cognitive appraisal. Physiological and energetic defenses against feeling are understood to be characteristic patterns of chronic muscular tension that are shaped in the early caregiving milieu. Methods for accessing and regulating emotions include building observational skills, practicing tailored movements, and engaging in relational exercises. Interventions are guided by a practitioner's creativity and the client's needs. Body-oriented interventions aim to enhance self-awareness, self-expression, and self-regulation, thus empowering clients to reach their personal and relational goals. Through integration with contemporary neuroscience, BioPsyA offers new insights addressing the interplay between the body and emotions within therapeutic contexts.

Keywords: theory of constructed emotion, Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis, predictive processing, active inference, character types

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> ***... emotion and cognition are functionally indistinguishable and arise from the brain's continuous process of interoception and categorization.***

From intuition to computation

By publishing the book *Character Analysis* in 1933, Wilhelm Reich, MD introduced the world to the idea of attending to the body during the practice of psychoanalysis (PsyA). In the 1950s, inspired by and expanding on Reich's ideas, Alexander Lowen, MD developed a psychotherapy he called Bioenergetic Analysis (BioA). From its beginnings, BioA has been understood and practiced in distinct ways by various practitioners. For some, BioA is understood as a coaching approach, wherein body-focused exercises and protocols are used to provide and teach symptom relief in the manner of cognitive-behavioral therapies. Other practitioners see BioA as a relationship-oriented depth psychotherapy wherein a conscious focus on embodied experiences facilitates the process, but is not central.

For distinction, the term Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis (BioPsyA) is used here to denote the relationship-oriented depth psychotherapy perspective, which is my own.

Originally, the BioA understanding of the role of the body in emotions came from the intuitions shared in the writings of Reich and Lowen, and were based primarily on classical theories of emotion. Today, the classical theories of emotion, including basic emotion theory (Tracy & Randles, 2011), and their foundations in the idea that emotions have distinct essences (Panksepp, 2010), have been refuted, as has the notion of a triune stimulus-response brain, which was found in most of the classical theories of emotion (Cesario et al., 2020; Steffen et al., 2022). As a result, Reich and Lowen's intuitions remain unanchored.

Fortunately, the 21st-century predictive processing/active inference framework of brain function – rooted in the physics-based free energy principle (Friston, 2010) – along with the theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2017a), provide a computational foundation for the BioA/BioPsyA understanding of the body's role in emotions.

The unified meshwork of emotion, cognition, and behavior

In alignment with the 21st-century understanding of brain function (see appendix A), known as predictive processing/active inference (Parr et al., 2022), and as posited in the theory of constructed emotion, BioPsyA assumes that emotion and cognition are functionally identical. Despite the subjectively distinct experiences of each, instances of "emotion" are indistinguishable from "cognition" at the neurological level (Hoeman & Barrett, 2019).

Cognition, like emotion, never occurs without affect (Duncan & Barrett, 2007), which is understood as a generalized and subjectively experienced summary of the brain's 24/7 process of interoception (Russell & Barrett, 1999). As a property of consciousness, affect is an ingredient in every mental experience (Barrett et al., 2016). From this perspective, instances of emotion are the result of learned cognitive constructs that have been applied automatically and unconsciously to affective states in situated contexts. In other words, emotions cannot be reified outside the contexts in which they occur. Emotions are a social reality (see appendix B). Counterintuitive as this may sound, attempts thus far to refute this understanding of emotion have failed.

Further, the predictive processing/active inference framework posits that, in the brain, the relationship of behavior to emotion and cognition is also indistinguishable (Clark, 2023, p. 102; Zhang et al., 2023). Cognition and emotion, only ever differentiated for purposes of efficient communication, are experienced subjectively only after the brain has already generated a plan for action (i.e., a behavior), and a synchronous, categorized, affective state. This is because the brain evolved in order to coordinate and control the systems of the body in service of movement (Barrett, 2017a, p. 3). Emotion, cognition, and behavior are all derived from the all-encompassing, simultaneous, meshed process in the brain known as predictive processing.

Subjective reality unfolds as follows: The brain launches a plan for action, also known as a prediction (Clark, 2015, p. 2), and sends a copy of that plan to the sensory and motor cortices. Simultaneously, the sensory consequences of that predicted action plan are generated as affect, which the brain categorizes based on the situated, external context.

This predictive sequence happens continuously at every moment of every day. It is the constant cascade by which the brain generates conscious experiences of thinking, feeling, and acting, which may or may not be experienced as emotion. If an emotion is experienced, it is because an emotion word has been previously learned to categorize that specific affective feeling in an associated context. Alternatively, a process called ad hoc conceptual categorization has occurred to make sense of bodily sensations in that context. For example, before the word *schadenfreude* made its way into the English lexicon, people were perfectly capable of experiencing pleasure derived from seeing someone else's misfortune, despite the fact that no single word efficiently categorized the experience (Barrett, 2017b, pp. 104-105).

Emotion words are tools that regulate the body's state. This process of emotion construction is unconscious, automatic, and learned through experience in much the same way that every other human concept is learned (Barrett, 2017b, p. 103). Importantly, constructed emotion is not to be understood as another name for cognitive appraisal, wherein bodily feeling is later synthesized with "high-

er-level judgment about what it means" (Clark 2023, pp. 99-100). Despite various attempts, this theory has not been disproven. It represents the latest best guess from the scientific community about what emotions are and how they function.

Character types to the rescue

Traditionally, BioA understands the physiological and energetic defenses that can make emotions inaccessible or dysregulated as characteristic patterns of chronic muscular contraction and movement that arose in response to the early caregiving environment. These patterns are understood to correspond to generalized mental conceptualizations of the self and the world. They are also understood to be associated with stories and meanings particular to each individual person.

BioA identifies five of these character types and understands them to have originated in the physical developmental phases of childhood. Whether or not they are identified as emotions, typical physical and mental defenses against strong feelings arise in the body of each character type. These defenses align with the physical and conceptualizing abilities a child had during the developmental phase when they needed to manage that feeling (and perhaps its expression) in a particular context (Lowen, 1958/2006).

While there is massive complexity across the presentations of each character type, in many cases it is possible to assign a primary and secondary type to a person. Occasionally, a typical manner of defending against strong feelings will cut across many contexts. This is generally a signal that disruptions in the child's environment during a particular developmental phase catalyzed chronic unmet needs or traumatic experiences (Lowen, 1958/2006).

This characterological understanding of defense arises directly from Reich's original understanding of the body's role in the process of psychopathology, and his concept of bands of tension ("armor segments") from the eyes to the pelvis (Reich, 1933/1990, p. 368).

The BioA character types are as follows: schizoid, oral, masochist, narcissist, and rigid (Lowen, 1958/2006, p. 151). Since their introduction, people have assigned less pathological-sounding names to these "characters" in an attempt to destigmatize them. The schizoid type is now known as the dreamer/creator, the oral type as the communicator, the masochist type as the solidifier, the narcissist type as the inspirer, and the rigid type as the achiever (Robbins, 1988/1990, p. 14).

The physical and conceptualizing abilities of each character type to defend against insult or overwhelm follow along developmental lines.

- Schizoid (dreamer/creator), 0–3 months: Babies have no control over their body, and cannot conceptualize. This correlates with the primary defense of dissociation.
- Oral (communicator), 3–24 months: Babies have very little control over their musculature, collapse easily, and have minimal ability to conceptualize. The primary defense will be making a ruckus, followed by collapsing.
- Masochist (solidifier), 18–48 months: Children have developed a sense of self and other. They can stand, walk around, and understands many concepts. The most salient concept is "no." The primary defense is refusal.
- Narcissist (inspirer), 24 months–7 years: Children are developing all the gross and fine motor skills, and have nearly reached the age of reason. Their conceptualization skills and physical capacities are well-developed in a manner that reflects a caregiver's expectations of who they "should" be. The primary defense is to passively or actively control others.
- Rigid (achiever), 7+ years: Children have reached the age of reason. They have developed all childhood gross and fine motor skills. The concepts used to understand the world, themselves, and others have been passed from caregiver to child, and will continue to develop over time. The primary defense is intellectualization. Muscular contractions correspond with the most typical concepts used to defend against feeling or the movement of energy in the body, as concepts are literally tools to regulate the state of the body.

Before addressing methods for working with character defenses, it is important to note that these conceptualizations of character type are not akin to zodiac signs. Character types are not destiny any more than it is destiny to not speak a second, third, or fourth language simply because English was learned first. Character defenses developed in a particular environment at particular developmental phases. Each present moment is an opportunity

to add new experiences of thought and movement that can be deployed in the future.

Furthermore, understanding what makes an emotion inaccessible or dysregulated changes along with the predictive processing/active inference understanding of brain function, and along with the theory of constructed emotion. In these frameworks, emotions are never actually inaccessible or dysregulated. Rather, the predictive brain either chooses poorly (or does not choose) emotion concepts for the current moment. Past experience is embodied in the concepts most typically chosen (including emotion concepts), and therefore in the person's character. Thus, past experience continues to unfold in the present moment via the person's actions and thoughts.

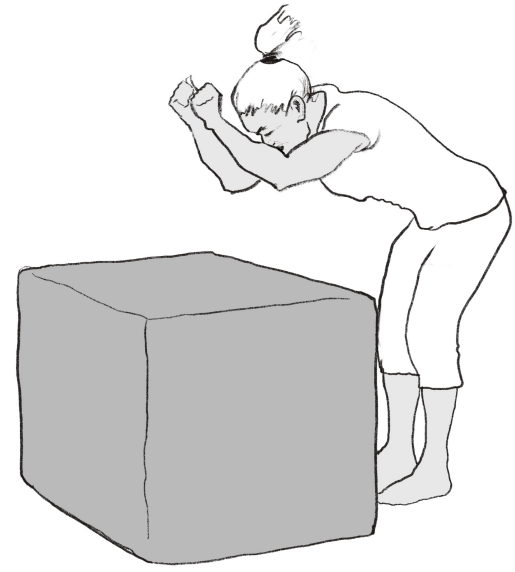
Deconstructing character defenses and building a better model

From the frameworks of predictive processing/active inference and the theory of constructed emotion, what it means to access and regulate emotions departs dramatically from the perspective held by classical theories of emotion. From this 21st-century vantage point, accessing and regulating are merely conceptual terms that facilitate efficient communication. They do not represent distinct processes occurring in the brain vis-à-vis emotions (Barrett, 2013).

Myriad as they are, methods for working with individual presentations of character defenses will be limited only by the practitioner's imagination. There is no specific protocol or exercise that works for every person, or for each person every time.

Specifically, the way I work with defenses to access and regulate emotions is by utilizing observed relationship patterns between the client and me, in the manner of psychoanalysis, and through hundreds of movements and relational exercises I've learned over years of bioenergetic training and exercise classes – or often invented on the fly – to expand an individual client's repertoire of actions and feelings, including emotional states, that may be restricted by being "locked in character."

At any given moment, the choice of intervention, be it interpretation, movement, or exercise, is directly related to the particular trouble a person is experiencing or wishing to address at that moment. An intervention can be as subtle as identifying the patterns of relating between client and therapist, and discussing how those translate into the client's life. It might simply involve pointing out the client's embodiment patterns as they speak. It might be as dramatic as a client screaming into a towel or pounding their fists on a foam block, or anything in between.



For example, if a client has trouble maintaining their confidence and resolve in the face of a strong personality, an exercise could involve inviting the client to notice what happens in their body as the therapist approaches them with an agenda, as if they were that person in the client's real life.

This allows the client to recognize the physiological state they automatically switch to in the face of that person – in this case represented by the therapist – and consciously choose to practice altering or regulating their state: i.e. changing the automatic, unconsciously chosen winning predictions for action that the brain has been using to navigate that moment.

Generally, the client might recognize, for instance, that they tense up, lock their knees, limit their breathing, and stop being able to think. They might acknowledge that they want to disappear or run away, and that they have far more energy in their body than they would like. They might also recog-

nize a word they use to name this emotional state, or they might notice that they don't have an emotion word for it. Some will call it fear; others terror, alarm, agitation, or even panic. The choice of an emotion word will depend on that person's past experience with categorizing that type of situation.

Recognizing all these factors will lay the foundation for choosing specific targets for changing their physiological state and their intellectual conceptualization of the situation so they can successfully navigate interactions with a "problem person" in the future.

Once this awareness is established, the exercise is repeated until the person has gained some mastery of their original physical state's new categorization – and of consciously switching themselves into a new physiological or energetic state more useful for managing themselves in that scenario.

This might look like naming the physical state "over-readiness," or "too much energy." The physical state could be modified by changing the client's breathing pattern, and softening the rigidity they notice in their body while the therapist repeatedly approaches them with an agenda.

The process of facing that person differently would be gradual. It would need to be repeated ad nauseam in order for the brain to encode the new patterns and deploy them automatically as situations demand.

It is important to note that this is not a process of overcoming an emotional state in the traditional sense of regulating emotion using cognition, rationality, or logic. It is an example of the brain learning something new – technically known as encoding prediction error in the 21st-century framework, and updating its model of the body in the world (Barrett, 2017a).

Desired outcomes of bioenergetic psychoanalysis

The goal of BioPsyA is always to increase a person's capacity for self-awareness, self-expression, and self-possession (more commonly known today as self-regulation).

We expect the client to gain the capacity to recognize the most common automatic affective states in which they currently live, as well as which contexts generate which affective states, and what categorizations (emotions or other meanings) they make of those affective states within different contexts.

We expect that by practicing new, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable cognition and movement patterns until they become more automatic and comfortable, clients will gain the ability to express themselves in previously inaccessible ways that are associated with improved life outcomes. In 21st-century parlance, this is expanding the model of self in the world (Clark, 2023, p. 217).

Finally, we predict that by having practiced expression of a broad range of feelings (i.e., soft and hard feelings) in a broad range of ways, and having built the capacity to generate meanings and affective states that facilitate their ability to take action toward the attainment of salient personal and relational goals, people will feel more empowered, fulfilled, competent, and satisfied with and in their lives.

Conclusion

It is a time of celebration for the nearly century-long tradition of body-oriented psychotherapy. Through the 21st-century science of brain function and emotion, Reich's early 20th-century intuitions about the functional identity of mind and body have been validated. Classical theories of emotion have been refuted, and the functional equivalence of emotion and cognition are computationally clear.

By integrating contemporary neuroscience with body-focused relationship-oriented depth psychotherapy, Bioenergetic Psychoanalysis offers clients a unique process for reaching a nuanced understanding of their own emotion construction process, and unraveling the unique ways they attempt to regulate those feelings through embodied experience. Identifying and working through both psychological and physical defenses allows clients to discover new ways of inhabiting their bodies, and experiencing a more empowered way of life.

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APPENDIX A

What is the 21st-century science of brain function and emotion? Simply put, it is a paradigm shift in the way both brain function and emotion are understood.

By way of background, the 20th-century classical theories of emotion suggest that humans have an emotional brain (the limbic system) that can be triggered and is controlled by a rational brain (the prefrontal cortex). A lizard brain (the brainstem) houses control of bodily functions and of most primal impulses, while fear gets its own special locus in the amygdala. If the rational brain cannot control the emotional and/or lizard brain, one is likely to be labeled as mentally ill. On the other hand, if one refuses to control behavior, one is deemed to be a social deviant or a loser. These theories propose that certain basic innate emotions are universal, and that our brain sits passively in a stimulus-response mode. All of these claims have been falsified by "large and convincing studies" (Clark, 2023, p. 97).

Fast forward to the 21st-century, where we find ourselves faced with the brain science of predictive processing/active inference, and the theory of constructed emotion that arises from this research.

Predictive processing/active inference suggests that brains are predictive, not reactive. Through a process known as allostasis, "The core task of all brains is to regulate the organism's internal milieu by anticipating needs and preparing to satisfy them before they arise" (Sterling, 2012). A predictive system is more efficient than a reactive one, and efficiency is the name of the game when it comes to survival. In utero, the brain begins to build a model of our body in the world, from which it makes predictions. When it encounters sensory data it did not account for, it encodes prediction error. Prediction errors either facilitate updates to the model (i.e., we learn something new), or the brain ignores the prediction error and proceeds with the current model, whether or not it best serves the organism.

The theory of constructed emotion suggests that emotions are not innate. Rather, they are socially, psychologically, and neurologically constructed. The brain unconsciously and automatically categorizes varied experiences of affect as functionally equivalent instances of emotion within situated contexts. Colloquially known as mood, affect is the subjective experience of the brain's never-ceasing process of interoception. "The brain models the world from the perspective of its body's physiological needs. As a consequence, a brain's internal model includes not only the relevant statistical regularities in the extra personal world, but also the statistical regularities of the internal milieu. Collectively, the representation and utilization of these internal sensations is called interoception" (Barrett, 2017a, p. 6). Interoception is the origin of feeling, otherwise known as affect. Computationally, the process of interoception and the simultaneous subjective experience of affect, however they might be categorized, are evidence of mind-body unity (Clark, 2023, p. 35).

APPENDIX B

What does social reality mean? And how is this useful in therapy?

Social reality or social constructs are concepts that groups of people agree upon as useful for efficiency of communication. Money, for example, is a social reality. Currency has taken many forms over the millennia: shells, gold, coins, bills, etc. Money creates efficiency when trading goods and services. Once upon a time, the French franc had value. Now, it is worthless, simply because a group of people decided in 2002 that the Euro had value and the franc did not – all because it was more efficient to use a single European currency than to have many different currencies.

Emotions, like money, are a social reality (Barrett, 2012). An instance of emotion can be summed up in a single word that efficiently enhances communication: I'm angry, I'm scared, I'm overjoyed, etc.

In certain cultures, including most post-industrialized Western cultures, emotion concepts (along with many other concepts for understanding and navigating life) are learned in early childhood from primary caregivers. As an infant wires its brain to its environment, the world is curated for that infant by its caregivers (Atzil et al., 2018). "Concepts are not merely a social veneer on top of biology. They are a biological reality that is wired into your brain by culture" (Barrett, 2017b, p. 145).

Emotion concepts vary from culture to culture. They are not universal. For example, the !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert do not share our concept of fear (Barrett, 2017b, p. 145). More surprising still, there are even cultures that do not experience thoughts and emotions as separate the way we do in the West.

Knowing that emotion concepts are a social reality, rather than inborn circuits in the brain, facilitates our work with clients in a journey towards emotion deconstruction and self-awareness that reveals important clues about their context, culture, and childhood.