

Toward Mind-Body Integration: The Organismic Psychotherapy of Malcolm Brown

Mauro Pini and Antonio Pribaz

Abstract

The article introduces the main elements of Organismic Psychotherapy, an approach derived from the theories of Kurt Goldstein, who along with American psychologist Malcolm Brown devised many original applications in the field of body-oriented therapies. Organismic Psychotherapy can be categorized as a humanistic-body psychotherapy, since it attempts to integrate the main assumptions of humanistic psychology with psycho-corporeal techniques inspired by Reichian and Gestalt traditions in a single theoretical-methodological system.

Key words

Organismic Psychotherapy - Malcolm Brown - Character-muscular armoring, - Body contact - Self-actualization

Organismic Psychotherapy was conceived and developed by American psychologist Malcolm Brown PhD., who with his late wife Katherine Ennis directed the Organismic Psychotherapy Training Institute of Atlanta. This body-oriented therapy takes as its theoretical model the ideas of German neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein (1939, 1940, 1954, 1959), from whom it derived its framework.

Brown's works (see: Brown, 1973, 1979, 1990) reflect various theoretical influences. Reichian tradition, humanistic psychology, Gestalt therapy, and the thought of novelist D. H. Lawrence all converge in an ambitious attempt at synthesis in Brown's book (1990) "*The Healing Touch. An Introduction to Organismic Psychotherapy*".

The author's concept of energy differs considerably from that of Wilhelm Reich. It was clearly influenced by the postulates of Kurt Goldstein, according to whom the organism has a constant amount of energy available, equally distributed in its parts. It seeks to return to this distribution when a stimulus alters its level of tension. Thus the organism's goal does not consist so much in the charging and discharging quantities of energy, as in Reich's well-known formula *tension-charge-discharge-relaxation* (Reich, 1942, 1945), as bringing the tension to an optimum level and distributing it uniformly throughout the system (equalization).

Another difference between Brown's organismic approach and Reichian tradition concerns the origin and function of character-muscular armoring. Brown maintains that this does not develop as a defensive framework against the sexual instinct, but can be traced to the joint repression by the False-Self (on the psychic level) and (on the organismic level) by the so-called closed cortico-cerebrospinal circuits (Brown, 1990, p. 313) of the True-Self's primary emotional needs, that consist in establishing a close and meaningful relationship with the caregiver. In the Author's terminology, the term closed cortico-cerebrospinal circuits includes cognitive activity isolated from the organismic whole, which inhibits the free flow of the system's vegetative energy and obstructs awareness of the Self's primary emotional needs, leading to the formation (and preservation) of character-muscular-armoring.

According to Brown, character-muscular-armoring expresses the sum of the defensive strategies adopted by an individual during the developmental process in order to alleviate the anxiety and psychic discomfort that occur when basic needs to relate to the attachment figure are not fulfilled. Thus the origin of its onset should be sought in the vicissitudes of object relations rather than in the pulsation-defense paradigm, as Reich believed.

The creation of character-muscular armoring, which Brown divides into three phases, produces a split between the organism and the mind-brain system, which can lead to psychopathologies and at the same time functions as a defensive barrier in interpersonal relations. In the final analysis, character-muscular armor represents an overall defensive strategy of the organism. The process of armoring and the resulting characteristic patterns of chronic muscular tension may originate in the failure of the primary attachment relationship. This failure leads to the loss of the organism's capacity for self-regulation; each part functions as an autonomous entity isolated from the others, the higher from the lower, the front from the back. The body's disharmony thus reflects the overall disharmony of the Self.

In clinical practice numerous indicators of this disconnection between brain and body can be observed. An example is the contradiction between the patient's verbal and non-verbal messages, at times expressed in a stereotypical smile of clearly defensive significance, which persists even when painful or traumatic subjects are brought up in the session. At other times, what the patient relates lacks any affective resonance, and this is reflected in a state of apathy or boredom on the part of the therapist, as frequently mentioned in the literature on the treatment of psychosomatic patients (Taylor, Bagby, Parker, 1997).

Brown adopts a multi-dimensional concept of the Self by introducing four psychodynamic polarities inspired by Lawrence's writings (1923, 1968) and closely linked to physical experience. They are defined, using terminology borrowed from European existentialist psychology, as Ontological Centers of Being: Agape-Eros and Hara, located in the front half of the body (upper and lower body respectively) and Logos and Phallic-Spiritual Warrior located in the posterior half of the body (upper and lower body respectively). The four Centers possess in equal measure both a meta-psychological aspect, as

regulators of the organism's energy dynamic, and a psychological aspect, as activators of meaning, archetypal images and models of subject-world interaction.

The introduction of the four Centers of Being expresses an attempt to anchor the structural bases of the Self in the embodied dimension of the physical; in Brown's terms, if isolated from the organismic totality, psychic activity assumes the features of a compulsive mind-brain system coinciding with the definition of closed cortico-cerebrospinal circuits. This disembodied mind-brain expresses psychic activity resulting from organismic fragmentation that inhibits the free flow of the system's energy, obstructing awareness of the self's primary emotional needs.

One of Organismic Psychotherapy's most significant contributions is the introduction of two different styles of non-erotic physical contact between therapist and patient: the nurturing touch and the catalytic touch (Brown, 1990). The first style describes body contact of a steady and continuous type, aimed at causing the patient to experience a situation in which the unsatisfied primary needs of relating and holding are gratified, inducing a state of muscular relaxation and stimulating awareness of the body and any associated emotional experiences. Catalytic contact, also used by neo-Reichian schools and in Lowen's bioenergetics (1958), consists in more structured body work, including pressure on certain chronically tense muscle groups and finalized in the dissolution of character-muscular armor by means of the neuro-vegetative arousal that stimulates emotional abreaction.

Nourishing contact is the most frequently employed tool in Organismic Psychotherapy compared to other body-oriented psychotherapies; if applied competently, respecting ethical and deontological principles (see: Smith, Clance, Imes, 1998), this could create what Winnicott (1975) defines as a "safe-holding environment", that is, an environment that can contain the emotions and the split-off parts of the patient. Parallels with Ferenczi's active technique (1930, 1953) are obvious, and (on the theoretical level) it can be compared with the attachment theory of the school of John Bowlby (see: Holmes, 1993; Cassidy, Shaver, 1999).

In an article published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (1979), Brown stresses that principles regulating the use of direct non-erotic physical contact are based on gratifying a need, as opposed to treatments prevalently based on the frustration of a need, as in classic psychoanalysis. In the same article, Brown discusses Maslow's hierarchical theory of need (1954) affirming that the effectiveness of body-oriented psychotherapies aimed at the progressive dissolution of a psychologically disturbed armor presupposes gratifying the need for security and affection, located respectively in the second and third steps of the motivational scale. According to Maslow, the experience of gratification is of fundamental importance; the organism's liberation from domination by needs belonging to a specific developmental phase allows one to follow a path of personal growth leading to self-actualization, the final phase in complete individual realization.

In the initial phase of treatment, body contact is oriented towards creating a therapeutic relationship, in which the patient achieves a suitable rhythm of interpersonal communication and perceives the therapist as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001). The therapist proceeds to focus on the patient's defenses, expressed on a psychic as well as a physical level, intervening in the pattern of muscular tension typical of his personality structure. Brown holds that working with the body also means relating to the patient's overall experience of the here-and-now of the session. More precisely, it does not deal with attacking the patient's defenses in an antagonistic conception of the therapeutic relationship (Shafer, 1983), which could provoke a psychotic breakdown, but stimulates the patient's gradual awareness of his characteristic patterns of chronic muscular tension. Brown points out that it is important to gently "challenge" the system of defenses in a non-threatening way, without provoking a reaction of wariness. In body work, the organismically-oriented therapist must always remember that respect for the other's being and for what he/she is willing to display of himself (self-disclosure) is essential at all times.

Developing increased physical sensitivity is connected with the acquisition of affect regulation skills; during therapy this is achieved by bringing the patient's attention to those parts of the body rendered less sensitive by chronic muscular tension, and employing the cognitive processing of the emotions.

Brown emphasizes the limits of the nomothetic approach in clinical psychology, and thus of the validity and utility of diagnostic categories (in particular regarding body-oriented psychotherapies of the Reichian-Lowenian type) along with the inadequacy of all pre-established techniques in dealing with the patient's subjectivity. According to Brown, adherence to rigid guidelines, although occasionally necessary in the initial phases of treatment in order to organize the non-homogeneous quantity of verbal and non-verbal information in the session, minimizes the importance of the relationship and in the final analysis finds its justification in the defensive needs of the therapist. Methods and procedures cannot be independent of the events of transference and counter-transference, since the therapeutic process is based precisely on these subjective dimensions (Bononcini, Pini, 2001).

Brown underlines the limits of body work methods of the cathartic type; if used to demolish the personality's defensive systems too abruptly, they can be extremely damaging. Therefore the therapist is obliged to respect and understand the functions of defense mechanisms and character-muscular-armor in the patient's psychic organization.

Organismic Psychotherapy does not provide a standardized series of exercises, and limits itself to describing several essential client-centered techniques, modelled on experiences emerging in the here-and-now dimension of the session. Nonetheless, Brown points out that the organismic psychotherapist's work should not be considered an arbitrary exercise based on mere improvisation and discourages any optimistic attitude regarding the duration of treatment. The dissolution of character-muscular armor requires a lengthy and complex labor of analysis and interpretation of resistances and their somatic equivalent, chronic muscular contractions. To achieve this, the therapist must possess an ample fund of knowledge and clinical experience (which he/she must, however, be ready to modify when confronted by each new personality), as well as a willingness to share the client's life experiences and offer constant empathic support.

In line with psychology's humanistic tradition, Organismic Psychotherapy aims to remove internal obstacles that impede the patient's process of self-actualization and a better integration of the personality. In Brown's perspective, self-actualization is a process of multidimensional development leading to the exploration of new emotional, behavioral and relational experiences; one emerges from a kind of "anesthesia" and stagnation to rediscover the ability to feel joy and pain. The individual opens up to a new awareness that permits modifying stereotypical behavioral patterns or dysfunctional relationship patterns based on defensive mechanisms adopted in the past and expressed at the physical level, in *character-muscular armor*. Restoring the path to self-actualization permits one to live fully in the present, plan realistically for the future, and retain full awareness of one's past.

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Biography

Mauro Pini (psychologist, psychotherapist), works in the Department of Addictions (National Health Service, Tuscany, Italy) and at the University of Pisa (Department of Philosophy, Teaching of General Psychology). He has published a number of research articles in national and international journals in the fields of personality, stress, addictive behaviors and adolescent risk taking. He has recently edited the following books: *Psicologia corporeo-organismica. Teoria e pratica clinica*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2001; *Aspetti psicopatologici delle cefalee primarie: teoria, metodi, risultati della ricerca*, Franco Angeli, Milano, Italia, 2006; Calamari E., Pini M. (eds) (2007), *Kurt Goldstein. Il concetto di salute ed altri scritti*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, Italy). He is also co-editor (with M.T. Pinardi and A.M. Bononcini) of the second Italian edition (revised and condensed) of Malcolm Brown's *The healing touch. An introduction to Organismic Psychotherapy* (Del Cerro Edizioni, Pisa, in press). mau.pini@tiscali.it

Antonio Pribaz (psychologist, psychotherapist) lives and works in Trieste (Italy), both as private practitioner and counsellor for public agencies and services (particularly in the fields of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders). He is a current member of the Italian Association of Organismic Psychotherapy (Società Italiana di Psicoterapia Organismica, SIPO) and his representative papers are the following: "Simulazione e Carattere", in AA.VV. "La Simulazione", Proxima Scientific Press, Trieste, Italy 1998; "Psicoterapia Organismica: un approccio fondato sulla relazione", in Pini M. (ed) "Psicoterapia corporeo-organismica. Teoria e pratica clinica.", Franco Angeli, Milano, Italy, 2001). prant58@libero.it