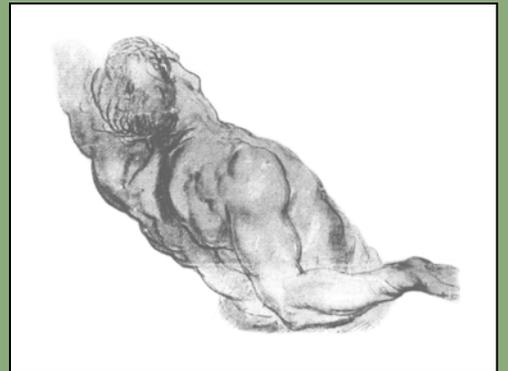


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USABP Mission Statement

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.



# Grounding and Its Variations

Odila Weigand, PUC/SP

## Abstract

The objective of this work was to deepen and update the concept of *grounding* in Bioenergetic Analysis. Both paradigms of psychoanalytic **drive** and **object relations** were discussed in the context of Bioenergetic Analysis, historical evolution. Brazilian therapists have been developing a unique identity in the last 25 years. It does not mean a schism in relation to the ideas of Alexander Lowen, but a differentiation as a result of maturing. This maturing happened as a response to the big demand for social mental health care, which constantly grows in the country, due to the Brazilian social disparity context and lack of effective governmental policies for mental health. This article has been excerpted from *Grounding e Autonomia. A terapia corporal Bioenergética revisitada*, by the same author.

## Keywords

Grounding - Bioenergetic Analysis – Psychoanalysis - Pulsion and object-relations paradigms  
Exercise classes - Self-regulation - Reichian therapy - Third-age.

The development of neurosciences (Schoore, 1994; Damasio, 2000; Damasio, 2004; Ledoux, 1996) have been confirming the main Reichian and Bioenergetic Analytic principles explaining, for example, the mechanisms of stress and shows through images collected by functional magnetic resonance and tomography through emission of positrons (PET) the relation between brain functioning, sensations, emotions and feelings and their role in health maintenance. The difference between practices based on the Freudian drive paradigm or on the **object relations** paradigm was not clear at the time I was a student of the Bioenergetic Analysis training program (1982-1986). My anxiety led me to publish an article in the *Clinical Journal of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis* (Weigand, 1987).

In that article, I began to express my bewilderment: why did the techniques learned during the training course at that time, beginning of the 1980's, instead of helping, aggravate the symptoms of a *borderline* patient that I treated on that occasion?

I admire Lowen's genius and I consider that his greatest contribution to psychology is the concept of grounding. It is one of the most diffused applications and one of the cornerstones of Bioenergetic Analysis. I believe in the value of offering teachers, therapists, group leaders and students the possibility of planning their therapeutic activities acquiring a deeper comprehension of the principles, fundamentals and functioning of grounding, at psychic and body levels. The concept of grounding assumed a larger significance when it was adopted and developed by other schools. With this amplification, the concept of grounding included the idea of a healthy self, rooted in the social group, in the family, the uterus, in the mother-baby relation, and later in the individuals own body and in the mother Earth.

Bioenergetic Analysis in Brazil, besides the clinical practice in private offices, has taken a socially responsible direction. Through the private initiative of the training institutions, clinics have been opened for the low income population in several Brazilian cities (São Paulo, Americana/SP, Recife, Ribeirão Preto/SP, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador). This type of initiative meets a growing demand for assistance with focus on the low income social classes and their specific problems. This is a Brazilian movement, because in many countries Bioenergetic Analysis remains a psychotherapy practiced in private offices. This kind of service developed in some Brazilian regions, I imagine may be similar to the service offered through the public mental health services in Italy and in Switzerland.

Among the resources of Bioenergetic Analysis, largely used in social clinics and in projects with specific social groups, grounding is always present as a valuable and essential instrument, especially when the work method is Bioenergetic Exercise Classes.

Leslie Lowen, wife of Alexander Lowen, created the Bioenergetic Exercise Classes. His patients and students gathered, under the direction of Leslie Lowen, to practice and experiment with body work. Lowen himself frequently joined the groups. This way, many of the Bioenergetic techniques were developed. The exercise groups constitute true laboratories, originating numerous creative approaches and uses, in different areas of human development besides clinic (education, organizations, sports, elderly people, adolescents, etc). In São Paulo, Maria Ercilia Rielli Gama and Ricardo Rego organized the basic knowledge about the structure and functioning of these groups in a manual (Gama, Rego, 1996).

Exploring creatively different possibilities of body work, Lowen and Pierrakos working with each other developed body techniques that helped to improve breathing and liberate tensions and emotions that blocked the free flow of energy in the organism. Searching for new manners of obtaining therapeutic results, they experimented with working with the body in the upright position instead of with the patient lying down, as Reich did. Thus, they developed the technique of grounding, discovered how to induce the involuntary vibrations in the body and started to use a *stool* to help increase breathing.

Grounding, a central concept of Bioenergetic Analysis, involves the notion that the legs originate not only physical sensations, but also feelings. Lively strong legs, filled with energy and planted on the ground, reflect a good perception of oneself and of external reality that results in the feeling of security and are the biologic basis for the perception of oneself as an

autonomous being, capable of self-regulation. This was an invaluable discovery that Lowen brought to the world of body psychotherapy. (Lowen, 1975: 1982).

It is important to stress that Lowen began with practice, observing the phenomena, which led him to search for theoretical explanations. He believes that body experience precedes the elaboration of theoretical concepts, and represents the basis and observation field that sustains theoretical development.

The evolution of bioenergetic theory, the path of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis (IIBA) and the trajectory of its founder, Alexander Lowen, are closely related. The concept of grounding has been changing through time, influenced by this history.

Bioenergetic Analysis became a very alive school, in continuous development, capable of assimilating and translating to the body psychotherapy language the postulates of other schools that do not work directly with the body. It recognizes the value of psychoanalysis to explain psychic dynamics, the pragmatic value of cognitive approaches, the socio cultural value of the systemic approaches, the discoveries of the neurosciences, the importance of the theoretical formulations of Winnicott and of the Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth.

This rich expansion and assimilation has been growing with the Bioenergetic Analysis schools in Europe, North America, New Zealand and South America, generating an interesting diversity of visions and competences. The theoretical corpus that from 1950 to 1980 was based on the writings of Lowen, on the second half of the 1980s starts to “walk with its own legs”, growing above all on the west coast of the United States, in Canada, in Europe and in Brazil. A new theoretical production came up in articles, conferences, in the manuals of the *Pacific Northwest Conference* and on the *Clinical Journal of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis*. Books also reflect these innovating incursions, but still in a limited number.

Alexander Lowen and Bioenergetic Analysis have been inseparable in the minds of therapists, clients and readers of his books. Justifiably, because Lowen kept himself at the head of the International Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis for four decades, guiding the course of the theory and the technique, teaching and training students and teachers. In 1996, however, he left the Institute and Bioenergetic Analysis continued its way, not without him, because he continued practicing psychotherapy for several years after. However, new names and productions were incorporated into this path, renewing it constantly.

In May, 2002, Leslie Lowen died. She was companion of Alexander and creator of the Bioenergetic exercise classes that became one of the marks of this body approach to psychotherapy, a facilitator of change.

Lowen has been a strong and authoritarian personality and his mark was left on the institution. He developed, though, a rare quality, typical of one who knows how to look at oneself under the light of one's own knowledge. He was capable of seeing the narcissistic hierarchy that usually formed at any institution, especially when there is a charismatic leader. Like many successful and admired leaders, Lowen could not avoid being seen as a myth by those who followed and even tried to imitate him.

In his book *Nacissism. Denial of True Self, 1983*, (It could be considered autobiographical), the author went deep into himself and exposed the dynamic that helps us to understand the neurosis that permeates our culture. And precisely for being so in contact with the truth, he fell into the trap of generalizing his discoveries, insisting on the primacy of sexuality as a solution for almost every kind of pathology. These generalizations created theoretical confusions, which were reflected in the practice of Bioenergetics.

His partners and followers gave and give continuity to the seed of Bioenergetics. John Pierrakos, who developed with Lowen the basic principles of Bioenergetic Analysis, followed his own way investigating the human energetic fields and the body energetic centers. Pierrakos created his own school in New York –*Core Energetics*, in which he combined the principles of Bioenergetics, Character Analysis, the work with negativity and a spiritual approach (*Pathwork*) that he assimilated from his wife, Eva Pierrakos.

## Drive paradigm

In Freudian theory, drive aims at pleasure, which is reached when one releases the tensions generated by internal excitations. To avoid disappointment, the individual avoids situations that can generate accumulation of tensions without possibility of discharge. Drive mobilizes the psychic apparatus, as well as motoric functions, generating behavior that seeks discharge of the existing body tension. This discharge is achieved with the help of an object.

The notion of drive is tackled by Freud as a concept that stands at the juncture between the psyche and soma. According to Brabant (1977), the source of tension (internal excitations) and the goal (discharge-pleasure) are somatic, but the quest for the object able to reduce this tension implies a necessary participation of psychic activity. The notion of a drive that includes psyche and soma is one of the cornerstones of Reichian psychotherapy and Bioenergetic Analysis.

Reich, in his initial period as a psychoanalyst, adopted Freud's ideas regarding unconscious, sexuality, infantile trauma, libido, self-preservation and species preservation instincts. From 1928, he added that the topics of the analysis should be addressed according to an order and not as the client brought them. (Reich, 1953:1995). Proposal that analysis should start from character defenses, (in other words, one should investigate and address first the peripheral layers of the personality) and his perceptiveness in unveiling the role of negative transference in the beginning of the therapeutic process, were integrated into psychoanalytic theory.

Reich drank from the psychoanalytic source, but created an original branch, developing, deepening and radicalizing the economic-libidinal principles. He separated from the psychoanalytic movement but never stopped being a psychoanalyst. Even

in the organomic phase, when he stopped emphasizing the practice of analysis to work directly with the stagnant DOR<sup>1</sup> energy and the biopathies, his thought was coherent with the economic-libidinal vision, with Freud's initial purpose to search for the biologic roots of neurosis.

Reich identified with the first ideas of Freud and, detaching from him, moved on in the quest for the roots of neurosis in the biophysical field (a quest that was abandoned by Freud). Lowen and other neo-Reichians also assimilated the initial concepts of Reich, up to the point where he turned to the theory of cosmic orgone energy. Lowen adopted Reich's views regarding the drive, libidinal energy and energetic flow, giving primacy to the work with blockages to the free flow of sexual energy. His efforts were complementary to the study of character, aiming at better comprehension of the form and functioning of the body and psychic defenses.

## Object Relations Paradigm

After the 1930's, psychoanalysis stopped considering drives as the central founding element of the self. Fonagy (1999) writes that the primacy of sexuality in the explanations of psychopathology was considered a conceptual mistake by many psychoanalysts, among them Melanie Klein. Because of this posture, Melanie Klein represented a transition between Freudian psychoanalysis and the theoreticians of the British School, in which are included Winnicott and Bowlby. Fairbairn, from the British Society of Psychoanalysis, was one of the first to propose that the libido is an energy that searches for objects and not the pleasure, as Freud postulated.

During the 1940's, the psychoanalytic schools followed the Kleinian line, adopting the principles of object relations theory, focused on the treatment for pre-genital issues. Hartmann, Kohut and Kernberg were exponents of these schools. In England, Bowlby developed attachment theory and Winnicott expanded his work with children and adults. Research focused on the behavior of families and healthy children started to be widely known from 1970, mostly with the work of Margareth Mahler, who contributed to the study of health – that which stimulates, in a normal child, the constitution of a healthy ego.

All these theoreticians turned to the study of development, removing the issue of sexuality from the center of psychic organization, in favor of a perspective of maturation, of which sexuality is one part. The concept of arrested development spread. Development suffers an arrest when facing a traumatic situation or the lack of an important experience in the appropriate phase, resulting in a "hole" in the personality. This hole will be part of the narcissist wound of the individual.

Within the psychoanalytic world, two basic paradigms started to be considered: the drive and the object relations paradigms. The difference between them consists in the manner of conceiving the nature of the object and the function of the object.

According to the maturational theory of Winnicott (Winnicott, 1988: 1990), the main motivation of the human being, which maintains life and distinguishes what is human, is the need to be in relation. Drive theory, on the other hand, propounds that the movement of life guides itself to the search of pleasure and discharging of excitation, aiming at the return to a state of psychic balance. Daniel Stern, has been one of the psychoanalysts who integrates both paradigms (drive and object relations).

## Grounding in the body: the basis of the self

Psychoanalytic theory is sometimes sought to explain a phenomena verified in the practice of Bioenergetic Analysis. Having words as its main instrument, psychoanalysis is good at explaining psychic dynamics. Body therapists often do not rely on words and explanations, giving priority to "*seeing*" and "*doing*". From the quest for integration between the psychoanalytic understanding and the "doing" of body therapies, arises the possibility of cross-fertilization: body therapists embrace conceptual explanations and rely more on language, and psychoanalysts embrace a more precise comprehension of the body processes, a knowledge that body psychotherapies have been gathering for about six decades.

There are convergences between Lowen (1983: 1993) and Winnicott (1988: 1990), including terms such as excitation and muscular eroticism. Winnicott says that the self finds itself naturally rooted in the body, but can, under certain circumstances, dissociate from it. (Winnicott, 1970: 1994). Lowen (Lowen, 1983: 1993) adopts the terms false self and true self, giving them a sense similar to Winnicott's and uses also the concept of a false *self* that dissociates from the body.

Lowen says that there is an inherent identity of body and psyche, and that "the babies are born with a self that is a biological phenomenon, not a psychological one" (Lowen, 1983: 1993, p. 36).

This biological self precedes the perception of oneself, which is a function of the ego. According to Lowen, the ego is not the same as the self, though it is the part of the personality that perceives the self. In fact, the ego represents consciousness or consciousness of the self. I (ego) feel (perceive) that my self is choleric. According to Lowen, Descartes was right when he said: "[I think, therefore I am]" with emphasis on the I. He would be wrong if he believed that thoughts determined the self. The contrary is true (Lowen, 1983: 1993).

The identity of the human being is dual. One part of the identity derives from the identification with the ego and its capacity to represent, and the other emerges from the identification with the body and its sensations, says Lowen. Damasio's

<sup>1</sup> DOR Energy (*Dead Orgone Energy*): Denomination given by Reich to a quality of stagnant energy in the body, in the atmosphere and the environment, which he appointed as a possible cause of illnesses of people and animals and the deterioration of the ecosystem.

observations coincide with Lowen's. He talks about a *proto-self* original and biologic. "*Proto-self* is an interconnected and temporarily coherent set of neural patterns that map and represent, each moment, the state of the physical structure of the body, at various brain levels. We are not conscious of the *proto-self*" (Damasio, 2000, p. 225).

The *proto-self* of Damásio, however, is not the same as the sense of self complete and integrative of the person as a whole. The *proto-self* is the "probable biological precursor of that which finally becomes the elusive sense of the self" (Damasio, 2000, p. 42).

Bioenergetic Analysis considers that life is not based on the will (Lowen & Lowen, 1977: 1985). This can be a tranquilizing concept, according to Lowen, for if the contrary were true, life would suffer a collapse on the first failure of the will. The core of the self, based in the body experience, guarantees the necessary stability so that changes can happen. This paradoxical function of maintaining a certain stability, that guarantees the possibility of changes, was called by Damasio (Damasio, 2000) "invariance of the body and impermanence of permanence"<sup>2</sup>. Lacking a self rooted in the body reality, the individual would have difficulty with intimacy, suggests Lowen (Lowen, 1983: 1993). Sex would be used as a substitute for love and intimacy, since intimacy requires an exposure of the self, without masks and without projected images. Physical proximity, the hugging, the darkness facilitate a mechanical sex, while the feelings are brought up by fantasies of imaginary partners, on whom the mind concentrates. With his acuity, Lowen observes that "the narcissists, being lonesome people, may like hugs, but I suspect that they do this because hugging is less threatening than seeing or being seen"<sup>3</sup>. (Lowen, 1983:1993, p. 117).

Winnicott (1970: 1994) considers the self as a psychic entity that will root in the body (for good or ill) according to the quality of the maternal care received by the child. Lowen (1983:1993) and Damásio (2000) have a vision of a biologic self that, however unconscious, exists since the birth. Boadella (Boadella, 1992) adds that the biologic self starts to exist during the intra-uterine phase, since the formation of the embryo. The uterus is the ground where the embryo roots itself. The consciousness of this self would be a function of the ego, developed afterwards from the mother-baby relationship.

Bioenergetic Analysis postulates that the idealized image (false self), the grandiosity that is accompanied by the feeling of being special, is the natural consequence of a lack of an adequate contact with the reality of the body and feelings, and with the physical ground, in other words, lack of grounding.

## Various Types of Grounding

Just like the different character arrangements, grounding can be seen as a communication code. Since birth, the child discovers many groundings. When lying over the mother's abdomen, it receives on the external part of its body the sense of being grounded, picking up the same rhythms of the mother's heartbeat, already known from intra-uterine life. The secure child is one who feels held and responds to the gesture, embracing part of the maternal body with a hand or with a curve of his body, at the same time that he is embraced by the contact with the mother. The mother who breastfeeds is giving ground to the baby through the mouth-breast contact. Upon looking at the mother's face and seeing himself reflected in her eyes, the baby recognizes himself. He develops contact with the earth and firms his basis on the ground while he moves in the face down position, learning to raise his head, to crawl, to crouch, to stand, and to walk. During the development of language, the baby starts to ground his ideas. "And all of this happens in an emotional environment that gives a background to the child's activity organization"<sup>4</sup>, says Boadella (Boadella, 1992, p. 89).

The therapeutic work aims at establishing new possibilities of contact with the many "grounds" from which the self develops. The work with the client proceeds to offer him resources so that he himself perceives that he can participate as an agent of his process.

Though the postural work involving the skeletal musculature and the liberation of blocked emotions has its value, the grounding acquired this way will be something peripheral, in other words, the roots do not solidify profoundly to support a stable self (Boadella, 1992). The grounding based on the relation (the breast, the lap, the look, the care of the mother), be it based on the *outstroke* or on the *instroke*, happens before the postural grounding. Without the first grounding, based on the relation, it is difficult that the postural work can build long lasting roots capable of giving support to the true self.

Reich (Reich, 1942: 1975) and Lowen (Lowen & Lowen, 1977: 1985; Lowen, 1970: 1984) emphasized the expressive cathartic work. To this end, techniques were used to promote the mobilization of the skeletal musculature and by this means to increase the energetic charge of the body by the amplified breathing.

In the past, the internal mobilization was many times brought out through screams. Touch, sometimes painful, was useful for "opening" the shell and also to promote a strong vocalization with emotional expression: screams of anger, fear, loud crying, protests. The problem with this approach, though useful, is precisely the excess. There can be an extreme increase of the energetic charge and excitation that becomes unbearable to the body. Certain techniques, when applied in an inadequate manner or exaggerated intensity, even with the objective of promoting grounding and integration, can lead to the contrary result.

## Postural Grounding

<sup>2</sup> Free translation from the original.

<sup>3</sup> Free translation from the Portuguese version

<sup>4</sup> Free translation from the Portuguese version.

Lowen (Lowen & Lowen, 1977: 1985) reports that in 1953, when he tried through exercises to increase his legs' sensation and improve the contact with the ground, he discovered the arch posture, which was one of his first experiences with grounding. Though it was an exercise known by the practitioners of the Chinese technique of *Tai Chi Chuan*, to him it was a new and revealing experience. Besides facilitating deep breathing, he discovered that this posture made possible the contact with the lower part of the body and a sensation of safety, with the perception of increased vitality and integration. In the arch posture, most of us, after a short period of time, develop vibrations that travel throughout the whole body in the longitudinal axis. The vibrations, that involve intensely the muscular and skeletal systems, have the potential to dissolve the tensions that became chronic and acquired an organization of muscular armor. The arch postures offer the possibility of diagnosing blockages. These become evident because they interrupt the flow and bring up sensations sometimes unpleasant, like muscular pain, cramps, nausea or dizziness. Lowen, during a lecture in 2002, said: "I don't have a technique that avoids the pain. I have a technique that overcomes the pain, because pain is tension. All you need is to breath, vibrate and use your voice. And work with your feet, because this is the base of everything". This type of exercise has the objective of creating a sense of postural grounding that, in turn, helps develop the capacity for autonomy, or else, a growth from infantile positions to other more adult ones. Postural grounding also tends to increase the energetic charge and the general excitation on the body.

### The Internal Grounding

Between patient and Bioenergetic psychotherapist, the element that supports internal grounding is the quality of the therapeutic relationship. This relationship implies trust, support, care, recognition, bonding. These are the qualities that make possible the confrontation of character defenses, when necessary. This way, the therapeutic process can move on and deepen, with the analysis of the resistances and by making true contact with the hurt inner child.

Many body psychotherapy schools mention the beneficial effects to the psyche of certain body activities done outside the psychotherapeutic context, in exercise classes or even at home. I believe that internal grounding also develops with a combination of Bioenergetic exercises and self-perception; that the self-perception can be created by practicing the exercises with body consciousness, perceiving not only the kinesthetic processes – the temperature, the breathing, the weight –, but the sensation of energy flowing, its pulsation, the excitation, the feelings of charge, lightness and possible feelings that arise with the mobilizations, as a way to the growth of internal grounding.

Daniel Stern called these sensations Feelings of Vitality.

### The Energy of the Internal Grounding and the *Instroke*

In body psychotherapy language it is common to hear that certain structures have "low" energy and that the individuals need to "recharge" to feel more alive. To understand which approaches are suitable for these people, it will be useful to tackle the concepts of *instroke*, which means the movement from the periphery to the center, and *outstroke*, which is the inverse movement, from the center to the periphery (Davis, 1999).

The continuous rhythm of both movements constitutes pulsation. This pulsation is the necessary basis for psychic development, according to Reich. Centering, focusing, concentrating, organizing, creating internal representations are functions derived from the *instroke*. The *outstroke* has been more studied and emphasized in Bioenergetic Analysis. Phenomena like contact, attachment, relationships, projections, speaking, emotional expressions can be understood in terms of the *outstroke*.

Davis represents the Reichian model of development in the shape of a spiraled wave. The flow to the outside makes contact with the environment, the flow to the inside brings information to the body. The *instroke* is the movement that gives energetic support to the feedback circuit, which works as a learning system, a system of information. The *instroke* provides the necessary energy for us to create meanings, and to organize the meanings in physical and psychic ways. It helps to decode the forms structured in the mind-body, transforming them into meanings that can become conscious through symbolization. According to Davis, without a clear functioning of the *instroke*, the external world is poorly comprehended and poorly represented. I think that Davis brings light to the energetic movement that feeds the internal grounding. He offers a bridge to support Lowen's statement (Lowen, 1975: 1982) that grounding promotes a realistic perception of the outside world and of oneself.

Reich postulated that the movement to the outside generated feeling of pleasure and the movement to the inside, feeling of anguish. But Davis's contribution complements the concept of inner ground proposed by Boadella and shows another perspective. Not always is the energetic movement to the outside associated with pleasure nor the movement to the inside with anguish. Davis distinguishes *instroke* from contraction. Both are movements from the periphery to the center, but the similarity ends there. A contraction blocks the flow, does not allow the energy to get to the center, lowers sensations and perceptions, restricting the energetic flow. Contraction is responsible for the formation of armor. Though contraction has in common with the *instroke* the movement's direction, in contraction one has the intention to get away from the contact (suppression or repression), to avoid something that would be painful, unacceptable or dangerous to the ego. On the other hand, the *instroke* is the free movement from the periphery to the center, that, when completed, originates the *outstroke* in a fluid and spontaneous way.

Accepting that the emotional and cognitive functions depend on the free energetic flow to the inside and to the outside, it is possible to better understand why a work of discharge (*outstroke*), done in the presence of blockages of the *instroke*, produces

dissociation and greater difficulty supporting the energetic charge. The *instroke* is responsible for recharge. If this direction is blocked, the energy vanishes from the organism

If the pulsation predominates in one direction, a biologic imbalance is unavoidable. The parasympathetic system corresponds to the libidinal expansion function directed to the world, and the sympathetic corresponds to the function of libidinal retraction, of a retreat to the inside of oneself. So, a state of prolonged parasympathetic response, dissociated from direct voluntary activity, in other words, without discharge, can itself form a potent neurotic defense against anguish. That is the case of a patient that sleeps during the whole day to escape from confrontation with his conflicts. The individual stuck in this parasympathetic state, which theoretically corresponds to an expansive state – *outstroke* –, suffers from an energy leak (Weigand, 1996).

Leak can be understood as dissipation, an energetically unproductive disorganized movement from the inside to the outside of the body. “A dissipation is an attempt at avoidance, a breaking apart to interfere with contact, not a breaking out to make contact. Dissipation is non-productive, directionless and not core connected or unified in its flow”, defines Davis (Davis, 1999, p. 85). In this situation, emotion works as a defense and, in the place of an action or organized and meaningful expression, acting out occurs. Another form of non-productive expansion, disorganized and disorganizing, is explosion. As a part of the *outstroke*, the explosion that crosses the defensive barriers of the ego, liberates excessive energy or energy without contact, like in the blind wrath or in manic episodes.

We can have energy enough, but this energy can be unavailable because it does not get to the core of the body. The pulsation is blocked, the energy does not flow or leaks because the person cannot tolerate very intense emotions, disturbing memories or a very sharp perception of her life situation. Davis concludes: “So there is no sense in adding more excitation to a system that is already overloaded. The idea is to mobilize the existing energy without charging or exciting even more, so that it can incorporate and process the feelings that were felt before like [too much].” (Davis, 1999, p. 86).

The contraction, be it on the *instroke* or on the *outstroke*, provides a sensation of strength and power. That is why there is reluctance to undo the contraction because of the fear of becoming too vulnerable. A false sense of grounding develops because of the identification with the contraction. This is armoring that limits possibilities and potentials. In this sense, grounding and rigid armor are antagonistic experiences. The physical and psychic behaviors are distorted by the armor, generating negativity inside the body and in relationships.

By increasing the sensation of an inner ground, it is possible to discard the use of many characterological behaviors. The armor has the function of protecting boundaries around a fragile nucleus. Mobilizing the *instroke* of the pulsation facilitates the rise of new possibilities and structures, anchored on inner emotional strength.

Self-perception, self-expression and self-control, in the sense of emotional self-regulation or emotional intelligence, are functions that result from the inner ground. Having this base, a sense of autonomy and identity naturally happens, without isolation. This is the difference between *instroke* and contraction. If we accept that the feeling of stable and flexible boundaries, which generate the sensation of individuality and potency, is an energetic function, it is possible to accept the meaning of pulsation for a feeling of unarmored safety.

Davis points out the advantage of doing practical work with the *instroke* to energize the limbic brain and strengthen its connections with the conscious cortex. As the *instroke* is one of the poles of the pulsating movement, the other direction of pulsation, from center to periphery (expressive and muscular), is essential to health, but it is neither preferential nor exclusive.

### **The premature grounding**

Robert Lewis, who deepened the understanding of mind-body dissociations, was one of the therapists connected to Lowen who, without breaking up with the master, reoriented bioenergetic body work. Lewis (Lewis, 1976; Lewis, 1989) studied the premature development of the ego in relation to the difficulties of building an adequate grounding. He credits this difficulty to the precocious experiences of the child with a caregiver that cannot recognize himself as a separate being from the child. In his neuropsychological immaturity, the child would receive this dissonance directly on her cellular structure, on her autonomous nervous system and energetic centers. This dissonance would be at the base of the falling anxiety of a three week baby, a case that Reich reports in *The Cancer Biopathy*, as well as the origin of premature ego development. In this dissonant environment, an immature young body, which should still depend on the caregiver for its self-regulation, needs to find ways to support itself alone, practicing the basic functions of *holding together* and *holding on*.<sup>5</sup> Besides the dissonant relation not offering safety, the small being still needs to protect himself from a caregiver that (supposing she is a mother), has herself an ego that is largely unstructured. I say “protect” because this mother can be unpredictably invasive, abusive and abandoning. To protect itself from the “unthinkable anguishes” caused by the rupture provoked by the environmental failure, the baby separates its psyche from its soma. José Alberto Cotta (Cotta, 2003) develops the issue of the psyche seduced by the mind, which can usurp the function of the psyche...”. This way, the baby starts to take care of and control the environment, forfeiting being taken care of. So, in an effort to face the threat represented by the caregiver, the baby develops prematurely a rudimentary ego, even without having neurophysiologic apparatus to do so.

<sup>5</sup> “*Hold together*” means maintaining the energetic-psycho-body integrity and cohesion; “*hold on*” has the sense of creating a bond, but also of grasping to survive.

Lewis (Lewis, 1998) emphasizes the therapeutic approach needed in cases in which the head reigns absolute over the body.

*The approach which tries to get many patients who are in bioenergetic therapy out of their physical heads, only furthers their dissociation; the underlying terror of insanity, and the compulsive thinking (ego or mind as false self) with which such patients hold onto a false sanity, can only be dealt with where it is (in the head), not where it isn't – in the abdomen or the pelvis. (Lewis, 1989, p. 22).*

When a patient comes to him with a disturbance originating in the beginning of life or cephalic shock, Lewis accompanies the client, literally supporting the head, to explore those “unthinkable anxieties” connected to the ancestral fear of losing control, “losing one’s head”. It is possible to say that in these patients who suffer from a body-head split, and who place in the mind the locus of the false self, there is a problem on the body level underlying the verbal level: the pre-verbal question of the shock, structured into the body during a very early period.

Lowen relates the rupture of the connection between head and body to a ring of tension at the base of the cranium, that interrupts the breathing wave, as well as the connection between thoughts and feelings. During adult life, this split would lead to distorted cognitive functioning. The gain in promoting, in the psychotherapy process, disorganization of the tensions and reorganization of the tonus, is that the longitudinal pulsation starts to include the head (brain) to the benefit of cognitive, affective and physiologic processes.

### Avoiding Grounding and Inner Collapse

According to Aalberse (1997) grounding is a dynamic balance between two poles: rise above the ground and sink into it. Finding the optimum point of contact is the objective of the therapy. There are two ways of avoiding the grounding:

1) The first way is by refusing to stand on one’s own feet, hanging onto others and placing the responsibility for one’s existence and well-being on them. The person remains completely dependent, vulnerable and incapable. If that fails, she plunges on the ground. At first, the sensation is of extremely heavy legs. Later, if the state is aggravated, there occurs a loss of energy in the legs, which are felt as being made of rubber and incapable of supporting the body. The whole postural tonus is lowered, the person literally falls over a lifeless pelvis. Under these conditions, the tendency is to seek for fusion with the other.

2) The second way is the opposite. There is a refusal to receive support, rising above the ground to avoid feeling contact with the reality of human interdependence. This is a narcissist personality, described by Lowen in the book *Narcissism*. The person rises up to compensate for low self-esteem, trying to maintain an idealized self-image of someone special, who is above and better than others.

A person can be *above* the ground or *inside* the ground to avoid being *on* the ground. Aalberse associates rising *above* with the arrogant behavior of pushing up the diaphragm, raising the shoulders, stiffening the neck and clamping the jaws. In addition, the pelvis remains contracted and pulled up. The tendency is to try to feel freedom through isolation. It is a pseudo-freedom and not an expression of autonomy. One gives the impression of getting rid of the other, but actually does not have the freedom to be intimate.

Both ways to avoid grounding carry the sense of trying to escape from a deep feeling of abandonment and rejection, charged with panic. This can be the profile of the person who carries inside herself a psychotic nucleus maintained under cover by the anti-grounding behavior. Often the external appearance is rigid, as well as the attitude. Getting in touch with one’s ground and the inner reality means going in the direction of this painful experience of emptiness. Not without a reason, Aalberse named his article *Fear of Grounding and the Dark Night of the Soul*. But he stresses the importance of going through the experience of the “dark night of the soul” to reach a deeper maturing of spirituality. According to both Alexander Lowen (Lowen, 1995: 1997) and John Pierrakos (Pierrakos, 1994), establishing steady roots on the ground unleashes the pendular movement of the energy in the direction of the cosmos. Spirituality is related to health and associated with an energetic perspective of the body. When the excitation increases and surpasses the limits of the individual, the person feels part of the universe, in a rich connection, accompanied by the sensation of completeness.

### The Grounding of the Eyes

When a baby is born, she it is already capable of searching actively for the mother’s eyes and she only retreats to her internal world if she finds a poorly welcoming environment. Upon retreating, she creates a blockage to the energy flow, which will involve the organs of perception (eyes and ears) and the brain itself.

With eye contact and face to face interaction, the caregiver acts as regulator of emotions for the child, “lending” her his qualities of self-regulation (Schore, 2001). Interactions brain-to-brain occur during face-to-face communication, mediated by orientations eye-to-eye, vocalizations, hand gestures and movements of the arms and head, all of them acting in coordination to express inter-personal perception and emotions.

The severity of psychic symptoms depends on the phase of development when the trauma occurred. The more precocious the trauma, the more severe the pathology will be.

Irene Cardotti (2003) integrated the therapeutic method of Bioenergetic Analysis with *Self-Healing* method, created by Meir Schneider (Schneider, Larkin & Schneider, 1998, 1999). Schneider developed several exercises focused on improving the vision function. To that end, exercises are planned to relax and at the same time tone up the organic structures responsible for the visual function. Combining *Self-Healing* exercises with the knowledge of Bioenergetic Analysis, Cardotti observed that her patients improved from organic pathologies that affect vision and reported psychic benefits, like peace of mind and emotional balance.

Lowen and Pierrakos pioneered in the treatment of primitive blockages that involve the ocular segment by developing the principle of grounding that channels energy to the legs and feet, discharges the excess energy into the ground and familiarizes the body with the vibratory state that allows greater tolerance of excitation.

### Grounding in the Family

A baby is not born in a vacuum. It is born into a family that lives within a social group and culture, and receives influence from one or more religious rites and creeds.

The arrival of the baby is preceded by many expectations about its future. The mother re-elaborates her various identities, as mother, wife, daughter, professional, etc. At the same time, the birth of the baby, who comes up as a third in the couple relationship, can accomplish different roles in regard to the parents' relationship. It can mean a strengthening of the marriage bond, if there was a previous fear of abandonment; it can substitute for the husband, who will be pushed aside to the role of provider; it can embrace the role of providing the unconditional love that the husband was not capable of providing. It can compete and become a threat to the marriage or it can be seen as a gift.

The woman also tends to reevaluate the feminine identity of her own mother. A process of modeling, identification and internalization of this motherly identity starts. If the model is considered negative, she will try to be different. The father can also have been the main figure of attachment of the new mother. Upon imagining the future of the baby, especially if it is male, the expectation will be of having someone similar or the opposite of a model that was either idealized or devalued. And not only the father, but the husband or a brother can be the reference. The baby can also come in charged with different tasks, like maintaining the continuity of the family, perpetuating its name or professional tradition, for example, to revenge some past offense, to legitimize the parents' union or even to promote their social ascension.

Also, substitute parental figures can be of great importance to the maternal psyche, especially if they compensate for negative experiences with the mother's own parents.

### Grounding in the Culture and in the Community, and Religion

*The new-born baby has come to the world and is held by the parents. The complex social relations of his private world are all around, but he does not have the conscience of them yet. Stripped off from culture, he awaits for the conditioning process that will lead to the character formation (Boadella, 1992, p. 62).*

Actually, the baby is not stripped from culture. Being inserted into a culture and into a social group implies rooting, absorbing the myths, the beliefs and the religious practices valid in this context. A child is not born in a vacuum, but is born from a couple, that belongs to a family, inserted into a social group, where there are beliefs and religious rites that are part of the culture.

*In childhood the parents have also elaborated their own God representations, which they will later present to their children, both consciously and unconsciously. Thus, the two major characters of this process – God and the child to be – are each to a different degree, preformed as representations in the parent's minds. Often, the conception of the child will be considered a gift from God, a punishment imposed by Him, or a new tribulation sent to test the believer (Rizzuto, 1981, p. 183)*

If the family is not religious, would the child have come to this world because of a biological accident or was she desired? The mythology about her origin, according to Rizzuto, will be incorporated to the self to create a representation of God and of herself.

The naming ritual, be it through baptism or even not being baptized, many times prescribes a destiny to the child. Giving her the grandfather's name who was an important character, the grandmother's or the dead brother's is the external demonstration of a pre-conceived image of her destiny.

The baby, in its omnipotence, recreates its mother and the pre-existing world, turning them into his own. Gilberto Safra (Safra, 2002), theoretician and scholar of Winnicott's work, observes:

*This is also the moment when the ethnic dimension of the baby's self is constituted, for as the baby takes the mother's body as his own, he organizes himself according to the ethnic aspects of the community where he was born. These ethnic elements develop and gain sophistication throughout development, through the child's living*

*together with others people in a common environment, through the appropriation of the ethos reflecting on the body-self, on the emotions and behaviors.*

Bert Hellinger, a psychotherapist who works with families using his technique of Family Constellations, identifies among the fundamental needs of a person the need to pertain to a reference group, because survival depends on this affiliation. “Children adapt without questioning to the groups inside which they are born, grow attached to them with a tenacity that reminds us of the process of conditioning”, says (Hellinger, 2001, p. 27). This connection becomes love and destiny, no matter if the family is nurturing or negligent. The values, habits, beliefs and actions of the family inscribe on the conscience and the unconscious and become part of the child’s identity. When somebody does something that threatens this connection, it activates a conscience of guilt, that works for the preservation of the family and of the social bonds of the original group. The function of this deep unconscious social guilt is to strengthen these bonds. That which the person perceives, believes and allows herself to know is determined by the strength of this bond and by the demand to belong.

*This conscience does not superpose the false beliefs and superstitions of the groups to which we belong, guiding us towards a superior truth. On the contrary, it favors and maintains these beliefs, making it hard for us to perceive, know and recollect what it forbids. (Hellinger, 2001, p. 27).*

In some primitive cultures, to symbolize the connection to a group, rituals that mark the body indelibly were practiced. There was a ritual by a group of North-American Indians in which the young warrior would dance in the circle of the ceremonial dance, with an elk head tied to his leg. His flesh was torn, but he kept on until the master of ceremonies ordered interruption of the ordeal. Severely injured, he comes out a winner because he survived. The right to walk as an adult member on his own legs has been granted, on the condition of submitting the very same legs to the prevalence of his group law. The ritual shows the symbolic relation between one’s legs and autonomy. By giving the legs up to the ceremonial pain, he abdicates of his own will in exchange for affiliation (Catlin, 1959).

Kayapó Indian girls, from the Medium Xingú in Brazil, when they reach puberty and menstruation begins, they have their knees bound together by very tight ropes. These ropes are maintained as the girl grows, so that the constriction around the knees remains a mark of her condition as a woman belonging to that community. The procedure has an esthetical value, just as in China, before the communist revolution, the small deformed feet of upper class women meant beauty and were a symbol of belonging to a social class.

Unrooting can produce serious consequences to the individual and to the society. There are the unrooted because of unemployment, bad work conditions, immigration, lack of instruction. According to Simone Weil, these individuals have only two possible attitudes: falling into an inertia of the soul equivalent to death or casting themselves into activities that perpetuate the unrooting. Gilberto Safra (2002) explains that “esthetical organizations excessively abstract, resulting from the machines or from the digital world, carry a type of sickness lived as a type of madness, in which the body stops being the lodging place of the psyche”. Lowen in his book *Narcissism* expounds a critical view of our societies, associating the growing narcissistic emotional disease of occidental culture to rooting, of which the origin is the poor contact with the body self that to him represents the essence of psychic health. The human body has temporal and psychological organizations that have been violated by the acceleration of technology and a vertiginous bombardment of visual stimuli.

### **Final considerations**

This article is a condensation of my thesis for a master’s degree obtained in 2005. The subject I chose to discuss is the development of Bioenergetic Analysis as a line of psychotherapy that has integrated the understanding of body psychotherapy as created by Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen with the development of new paradigms in the field of psychology.

When I started to participate as a teacher of training groups in Brazil, I felt the need to clarify the confusion that I had experienced during my own training, confusion that I perceived also in some Brazilian students’ minds. In 1996, I made a presentation at the XIII International Conference for Bioenergetic Analysis in Pocono (USA). The theme was energy leak and it was elaborated from unexplained questions from the case of that client who did not get better with the basic exercises of postural grounding, that I mentioned in the beginning of this article, and from other experiences of mine as psychotherapist and supervisor. I developed the perception of energy leak due to my own therapeutic process and by observing the same thing happening to several clients. In 1999, I wrote another article to try to elucidate the question of both currents that existed within Bioenergetic Analysis (it was published in *Bioenergetic Analysis*, 2001). From the positive reception of this article and the 1996 lecture in the Bioenergetic Conference, I felt more confident to divulge this discussion not only among the members of the Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, but to the community of body psychotherapists in general.

It is important to stress that Lowen’s retirement from the Institute represented a loss, but, paradoxically, also a gain. With the dissolution of the myth, the gain was more openness to other areas of knowledge and more possibilities of building creative manners of use for his discoveries. It rests with the followers to make good use of his teachings and check their effects on themselves, on their clients and on the students. It is fundamental to keep that which he taught us, transmit this knowledge to

others and also critically analyze his work. The integration of Bioenergetics with the contemporary advancements of developmental psychology, social psychology, trauma treatment and neurosciences is what is going to keep its flame alive.

According to Lowen (1995) and Pierrakos (1994), the rooting into the ground unleashes the pendulum movement of energy in the direction of the cosmos. Spirituality is connected to health, is associated to an energetic perspective of the body. When the excitation rises and surpasses the limits of the individual, the person feels connected to the universe. This relation is the cosmic feeling of spiritual connection that transcends the limits of human nature. I believe that the principles, the fundamentals and the praxis of grounding, developed by both creators of Bioenergetic Analysis, Alexander Lowen and John Pierrakos, stand true and deserve a place in mainstream present day Psychology.

This article is a contribution for a deeper and better based comprehension of this instrument, grounding, clarifying how it was conceived and how it has been developing, an instrument that many use because they recognize its potential, but will be able to refine and elaborate.

I hope to participate in the movement that stimulates mental health professionals to take on the task of promoting well-being and development for people and communities with which we have and will have the privilege of being in contact.

In Brazil, Bioenergetic Analysis schools maintain the social bases of Reich's ideas, adapting them to the contemporary reality of inter-subjectivity, social inclusion, citizenship, ethics and ecology, which not only opens a range of new uses, as well as demands the assimilation of different approaches, without losing its identity.

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