

CONTRIBUTORS

David Read Johnson, Ph.D., R.D.T.

*Department of Psychiatry
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
Veterans Administration Medical Center
West Haven, Connecticut*

Priscilla Rodgers, M.P.S.

*Psychoanalytic candidate
C. P. Jung Institute
New York, New York*

Eileen Serlin, Ph.D.

*Saybrook Institute, and private practice
San Francisco, California*

Alice Shields, D.M.A.

*Faculty, Rutgers University
New Brunswick, New Jersey
The New School for Social Research
New York, New York
Psychoanalytic candidate
Institute for Expressive Analysis
New York, New York
and private practice
New York, New York*

The Psychoaesthetic Experience

An Approach to Depth-Oriented Treatment

Arthur Robbins, Ed.D., A.T.R.

*Creative Arts Therapy Department
Pratt Institute
Brooklyn, New York
Institute for Expressive Analysis
New York, New York
and Faculty, National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis
New York, New York*

With contributions by
David Read Johnson, Ph.D., R.D.T.,
Priscilla Rodgers, M.P.S., Eileen Serlin, Ph.D.,
and Alice Shields, D.M.A.

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expressive therapy professions



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Introduction

In the next three sections, a dancer, a musician, and a dramatist, each trained as a depth-oriented therapist, will offer their particular metaphor applied to the aesthetics of a verbal psychotherapeutic dialogue. Each emphasizes a particular aspect of the psychotherapeutic matrix. All of them, however, have in common a belief in the psychoaesthetic importance of the therapist-patient interchange.

In the preface of my book, *Expressive Therapy: A Creative Arts Approach to Depth-Oriented Treatment* (1981), I stated the following:

In any one session, we can detect in patient-therapist communications both verbal and nonverbal cues that

can be examined within the artistic parameters of sight, sound, and motion; that is, in rhythm, pitch, and timbre, in color, texture, and form, and in muscular tension, energy, and special relations. These elements of therapeutic composition have their own principles and require the utmost skill in therapeutic management.

This nonverbal composition of a given patient's communication takes place on a number of psychic levels and presents a unique aesthetic character. First, however, let me define what I mean by aesthetic. In *The Artist as Therapist* (Robbins, 1987), I stated the following:

When I speak of aesthetics, I'm referring to making the inanimate animate, giving form to diffuse energy or ideas, breathing life into sterile communications. *Communication* is a key word here, for a complete work of any medium becomes art only when it touches us as a living truth. This happens when it is an authentic expression of the artist, and more often it involves an integration of polarities.

In another section, I further elaborate on this point:

When symbolic form includes multiple levels of communication and transcends its individual parts to communicate a larger meaning, it approaches the level of aesthetic communication.

Historically, the language of the artist has always addressed itself to the self that cannot easily be reduced to words. In the following sections, each artist will offer his/her special view of the language of art applied to the therapist's grappling with an understanding of man's wish to give freedom and space to the very essence of where the self lives.

Movement Composition and the Choreography of a Verbal Psychotherapy Session

Eileen Serlin

P moved against the far wall. She stayed in the corner, keeping 4 or 5 feet between herself and the other group members, not acknowledging them in her movements. She was hunched up, eyes closed, energy pulling inward, hands gesticulating. These hands seemed to flail out into empty space, hands curled like claws, clawing the air. Her head was tilted toward one side, eyes beseeching and flaring, mouth twitching.

She says she wants to be touched, but is terrified and furious. She grew up in an orphanage and was sexually abused as a child. She is afraid of being violated and abandoned.

P's back was to the wall, braced by the wall. This was the only solid point of contact, of support. Everything else was flailing, desperately, helplessly, uselessly. Her body was limp and lacked a strong central inner support.

I momentarily saw my cat, a frightened creature. My cat loves to be held, but if approached tentatively, head-on, with hesitancy, she'll lash out and claw. If approached from the side, however, with swift sureness, decisiveness, and a firm touch, she will melt and cuddle.

I swiftly approached P. Without pause, I moved in from the side and placed my two palms against her thrashing hands. She pushed my hands away. As she pushed, her body resisted, strengthened, and focused. Her flaccid weight mobilized, her diffuse efforts organized. She pushed, and I pushed back. As we pressed

against each other her inward-pulling energy reversed and flowed toward me. As I stayed steady and clear, she continued to mobilize her efforts toward me, integrating and mobilizing herself.

Suddenly she screamed—uncanny screams, one after another. Then she fell sideways, across my lap. I leaned over her, pressing my upper body down on her, containing her with my body. Her thrashing diminished, her body quieted, and her tears stopped. She looked at me and said softly: "Thank you."

What happened during this session? P is a borderline personality, with issues of early maternal deprivation, trust, splitting, and boundaries. Although I worked with her nonverbally, I believe that elements which I used to sense our interaction are ones which can be used to understand a verbal session. These elements—body, space, time, and energy—are from the language of dance and describe basic compositional elements of any diagnostic or interactional process.

The language used in most traditional psychology comes from a mechanistic, Cartesian system that posits discrete entities, such as ego and id, or which suggests that dance is about a body literally projecting itself through space. Modern physics, however, has shown the world to be more fluid than this. From a non-Cartesian perspective, a study of the human mind would describe processes rather than entities and qualities rather than quantities. These processes and qualities are already in movement; movement is basic to life. Using the language and images of dance can thus help to articulate patterns of any process. What are the elements of a dance language and how can they be used to

describe the therapeutic process? I will first describe the elements as concretely manifest in the session with P, then I will show how these elements can be used metaphorically to understand the compositional aspects of a therapeutic process.

Body

1. **Body parts.** Body parts means which parts of the body are emphasized in the movement and how they are used. P used primarily her hands, head, mouth, and eyes. Her hands were like claws, curled inward, arms crooked, head at an angle, mouth grimacing as though she were vomiting, and eyes fixed and glaring. Her torso was concave and still. The shapes of the body parts were in complex angles, convoluted and twisted.

2. **Organization.** Organization describes how the parts are organized into one moving piece. P's body seemed all joints. The parts did not move together as one organized system, but moved in fragments. A clear, organizing center was missing.

3. **Posture.** Posture describes the organization of the large architectural units of the body. P's back was supported by the wall. She was not able to maintain an upright posture without this support. With the support, however, she could sustain a great deal of peripheral activity.

4. **Flow.** Flow is the movement of energy through the body parts and joints. Movement flowed through P's body in a twisting, grinding, circling, spiraling motion, successively moving through the joints.

Space

1. Perspective. If these movements took place in a composition, how would the composition be arranged? P chose to position herself in a far corner of the room, squeezed into the line between floor and wall. She was far from the others in the group and from me. She looked as though she were being seen through a telescope, appearing far away and huddled small.

2. Open versus closed. What is the basic spatial configuration along the dimension of open or closed? P's body was twisted into itself and did not open out to others. Her flailing hands created a wall of "static," a shield of chaos through which penetration to her heart or body center would be difficult.

3. Kinaesphere. How large is the "personal space" bubble in which the mover moves? P claimed a large area as her own space, and her movements did not echo anyone else's or invite anyone into her space. This personal space was clearly hers and not shared.

4. Boundaries. Boundaries refer to the outline or edges of the movement. P's hands kept circling. They did not seem to come up against anything or suggest any edges. There was a sense of her inner self pouring out without a firm container to hold the writhing torment.

5. Negative space. What is the relation of mass to surrounding (negative) space? If P's body were seen as a sculpture, the space around her would be an empty void. There was not a dynamic interplay of matter and space, an interpenetration of shapes. The space around P did not support or contain her; she seemed lost in space, diffuse, alone.

6. Relationship to objects in space. Do P's move-

ments reach out toward others, make clear or vague paths through space? P did not carve through space or reach with intentionality or purpose toward any other individuals. Her efforts to cope with her environment and with others were minimal.

7. Pathways of contact. If contact were to be made, what logical approach would the movement suggest? P's frontal movement blocks and her glaring eyes said not to approach head-on. When, in fact, one of the group members asked if she could approach, P refused, and the group member said that she would have approached too directly. A clear, indirect, peripheral path to P would reach her without threatening her and would establish strong contact at her boundary.

Energy

Energy describes the qualitative (light-strong, quick-slow, direct-indirect, bound-free) and directional aspects of the movement. P's efforts were predominantly light, sustained, very bound, and indirect. The flow of energy pulled inward, referring back to the body center. The loops of movement were repetitive and of even intensity, lacking clear phrasing or closure.

Interaction

What was my own sense of body, space, and energy and how did I use my force field to create a therapeutic dance with P?

First, I sensed her as very far away, as if I were looking at her through a telescope. She felt remote and unreachable. I inched closer, just trying to feel her