

**Somatic Experience:
In The Expressive Language of the Living**
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For the US Study/Supervision Group*

CHAPTER 6 – Traces of the Other: Encounters With Character

Encountering a 'character' in a session with Liz:

- I often felt pulled between her self-presentation of endurance and devotion and what I saw as a chronic sense of fragility, fatigue and unhappiness (in my perception, and not her words).
- How could I speak to my experience without seeming judgmental, shaming, diminishing?
- She frequently described herself as 'enduring' in nature, and I often felt enduring in her presence. We were waiting for what?
- Her hours with me seemed to fill my office with stories of the people in her life, but rarely of herself.
- Where was *she* in the hours with me?
- I could not hold myself within her field, just as she could not maintain herself in the relational fields of those around her. We each disappeared from the other. I felt strangely quieted by her; boxed in.
- How could I bring this sense of reserve into the work, to provide meaning?
- We had become mired in the endless present of her life outside my office.
- I felt increasingly dulled and used, related to more as hired help than as an entrusted professional.
- My body felt more and more absent in the sessions, and seemed to report in to me only after she left.
- I noticed she rarely moved with any force or spontaneity. I began to realize that this subtle but deep bearing of her body was much of what quieted and inhibited me. I

didn't feel the right to speak with too much force.

- I often looked at her without seeing anything in particular and I began to realize that I wasn't supposed to see anything in particular.
- This was so familiar that it had become invisible, and in its invisibility had ceased to convey any meaning.

Treatment

- The therapist noticed a rare flinging of her arms outward with aggression, then a retreat back to the usual.
- He emphasized the moment by mirroring it, and encouraging her to try it again, making it more conscious.
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- This elicited an underlying panic, and childhood memories of being oppressed.
- She came to understand that she had sacrificed her exuberance as a child for an externally rewarded posture that became her own ego ideal.
- She carried in her an unspoken joy wishes to be a joy in her parents' lives, and for them to want her with them.
- She had been excluded from any meaningful, emotional place in her parents' lives.
- Opening up her body through movement opened her to the revitalization of her childhood desires, and opened up her relationships as well.

The unfolding work with her illustrates a crucial, if unconscious, aspect of character as a powerful form of unconscious communication.

Character defense simultaneously inhibits and deadens internal impulses that threaten one's ego ideal and self-control, while also protecting one from danger and disapproval from family and society at large.

Our characterological modes also profoundly impact the feelings and behaviours of those around us – directing, inhibiting, and foreclosing the possibilities of relating.

Reich saw character expressed in *action and attitude*, arguing that character structure was a nonverbal, unconscious, ego-syntonic, and powerful shaper of one's interpersonal space.

Inaction as well as action can be a powerful expression of character.

Encountering a 'character' in a session with Simon:

- In sessions, he talked mostly to himself about himself, vaguely aware of my presence. Rarely did he address me directly. I rarely felt present to him.
- He seems to accept whatever I had to offer. His rare questions to me sought intellectual explanations for his feelings and fantasies. He did not ask questions that sought action.

Treatment

- I noticed when he asked a question differently, that brought the two of us into the room. He asked about *how* instead of *why* – these questions invited action.
- He was startled and touched when he began to realize that I felt something for him and that I was *looking at* him, not just listening. He realized that he structured his life so that he was rarely seen by anyone, that he rarely saw anyone.
- Silences grew; he noticed his body experiences more.
- I inquired as to how he might begin to *show* me his experience – experiment with movements, impulses in his body and let it move.

Reich realized that verbal interpretations were limited in their effectiveness in disrupting or shifting character organization. He emphasized the emergence of character within the transference dynamics.

Reich also recognized that he had to reach the body more directly.

He realized that his patients deeply, unconsciously identified with their character defenses, that these defenses were profoundly ego syntonic, reinforcing an ego ideal that often seemed necessary for acceptance and survival.

“We isolate the character trait and confront the patient with it repeatedly until he begins to look at it objectively and to experience it as a painful symptom; thus, the character trait begins to be experienced as a foreign body which the patient wants to get rid of.”

There was something unique in the potential of characterological descriptions to evocate so much of the somatic, unspoken dimensions of a patient’s way of being.

Note: Character theory had provided a sense of an authoritative or definitive way of knowing, which could often be misused by practitioners, rather than simply one way of characterizing a person among many others that might reflect their preconceptions about the world.

Stephen Johnson brought in a bioenergetics perspective, while retaining Reich's emphasis on the body, while also humanizing the model and emphasizing the developmental and functional aspects of character styles.

Christopher Bollas provides a more fluid and imaginative framework that allows us to see character differently, as something more deeply formative and informative, as an unconscious structure of communication, "*a bearer of intelligent form that seeks others to express its structure*".

Bollas speaks of *being* a character, in contrast to *having* a character structure.

"To be a character is to gain a history of internal objects, inner presences that are the trace of our encounters, but not intelligible, or even clearly knowable: just intense ghosts who do not populate the machine, but inhabit the human mind."

The nonverbal force of character can be that of a fundamental, unconscious form of communication: look *here*, not there; notice *this*, not that; feel *this*, not that; say *this*, but not that.

(See [LOVE POEM WITH TOAST](#) by Miller Williams)

Bollas argues that character is not simply a defensive derivative:

"Being a character means that one is a spirit, that one conveys something in one's being which is barely identifiable as it moves through others to create personal effects, but which is more deeply graspable when one's spirit moves through the mental life of the other, to leave its trace."

Bollas captures the paradox of character: *"That while character contains the intention to constrain and foreclose otherness, it also needs the other to come to life, to make its mark, to find its meaning."* (This is a key understanding of character!)

Encountering a 'character' in the supervision of sessions with Andy:

- He was skilled in steering his therapist, who was rather desperate to provide relief to his client, into parental positions that he was thoroughly skilled at then defeating.
- He had an insistent attention to his body, especially his exhaustion, and to events that happened outside of the sessions.

- His concreteness and lack of emotional awareness unsettled the therapist, who kept falling back into a problem-solving mode that yielded little result.
- In supervision, we wondered about the possible meanings of Andy's anxious preoccupation with his body and how it might be addressed.
- The therapist needed to *accompany* Andy's exhausted body from session to session, week after week.
- "Have him take you with him through his day in his depressed and listless body, his congested brain."
- "What happens when he wakes up in the night? Where is the tiredness in him? What are his awakening thoughts? What does he imagine he looks like to others during the day? What, if anything, feels good to his body?"
- Live this exhausted body and congested brain with him – *don't fix it, experience it.*
- Help him develop a different way of relating to his troubled body. Don't leave him alone with it. And don't send him elsewhere to various repair shops.
- For the therapist to become truly interested in and engaged with Andy's suffering body and his muddled brain would be a fundamental change from the neglected and punitive attitude Andy and his body had known all his life.
- What had become most apparent through the consults was the deadening impact of Andy's character on the therapist.
- Andy's character style infected, affected, and nearly immobilized the therapist; at the same time, it was a silent, unconscious call for something different.
- This process would require many repetitions in order for it to begin to feel real and reliable to Andy, such that he could internalize it on both conscious and unconscious levels of awareness.

The work with Liz and Simon illustrates both Reich's theory of defensive deadening and Bollas' perspective of an essential spirit being seeking to both infect and inform the other.

In Reich's model, Liz would be viewed as a *masochistic character* structure, with her severe inhibition of aggression, long transformed and subdued into a capacity for endurance and sacrifice, tinged with bitterness.

- Her expressions of aggression found secondary forms of expression in her control of those around her.
- Her expressions of love were not marked so much by pleasure, delight or sexual passion, but rather by decency, loyalty and devotion, which she both offered to and demanded of her family members.
- Though she suffered from her masochistic stance, it was something that she valued in herself, and was often admired for (or taken advantage of) by those around her.
- In the face of her character style, her therapist too became subdued, re-enacting the ghost of her grandmother's way of raising her.
- Her place with her grandmother may not have been one of delight and joy, but it was a place of belonging and security. This was good enough.
- These patterns of care and place became primary to her internal world. It was what she offered to herself and her loved ones.

In Reich's model, Simon would be understood as a *schizoid character* structure, exhibiting a cold, intellectually detached posture, content and comforted by his internal fantasy world.

- With this posture, he unconsciously warded off rejection and maintained a protective loyalty to his ailing and profoundly inhibited parents.
- His suffering was largely silent and unrecognized by those few around him.
- He was literally doing the best he could, barely even able on his own to long for more.
- The expression of the therapist's frustrated vitality created a disturbance in the field between them, and unexpectedly gave him a whiff of life.
- He did not kill it off, but slowly took it in, and made it his own.
- He began to recognize the corpse-like way of his body, and was unsettled by this new awareness of self. His body opened to him in his dream life, which created new possibilities for existing.

We can learn to be receptive to the form, the impact, the compelling subjectivity, the subtle traces of history and desire laden in character as a structure of unconscious communication.

We can develop the ability *to be moved* by those somatic and affective patterns that we might have previously been taught to categorize, analyze and then break down.

Characterological patterns contain a constant, living tension between unconscious restraint of self and others on the one hand, and the spirit of unconscious communication to the other, which seeks to permeate the mental lives of one another, hoping to make their mark, come to be understood, and thereby find new freedoms of experience and expression.