

Exploring the Sexual Etiology of Violence

Rod Sandle

BIOENERGETIC THERAPIST AND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYST, WELLINGTON

Abstract

Many of the different theoretical and practical approaches of NZAP members to their work have Freudian theory as their historical ground, although some have diverged in different directions from this base. Freud placed sexual theory at the centre of his attempt to understand human mental suffering and it remains very relevant and useful in everyday psychodynamic clinical practice; however its scientific basis has become outdated, and this has led to the loss of its presence in the literature. This paper re-affirms Reich's challenge to Freud not to lose faith in sexual theory, and provides an update from the perspective of population genetics. Beginning with a brief historical overview of the early development of psychodynamic sexual theory, the paper explores the associated symbolic and logical domains, as these domains fluctuate in their role as figure or ground, emphasising relationship as the key to healing. The reworking of sexual theory offers a wider community and social context providing, perhaps, a ground on which to bring our clinical knowledge to the task of understanding and working with conflict within our own community and the community at large, including the bicultural relationship between Māori and Pākehā.

Waitara

Ko te maha o ngā ara ariā, ara mahi hoki a te whānau o te NZAP ki ā rātou mahi whai ai i ngā ariā a Freud hai whakapapa kōrero o mua, ahakoa kua whai pekā kē atu ētahi mai i tēnei papa. I tāpaia e Freud te ariā taihemahema ki waenganui o tana whakatau kia mārama mai te mamae o te hinengaro tangata ā, kei te noho hāngai tonu ki ngā mahi manamanahau haumanu hinengaro. Heoi kua tawhito kē tēnei tirohanga papa pūtaiao, ā, kua ngaro tōna āhua i roto i ngā pūkōrero. E tautoko ana tēnei kōrero i te wero a Reich ki a Freud kia kaua e waiho noa te ariā taihemanga, ka whakaratohia tētahi tirohanga hou e ai ki ā te mātauranga momo whakaheke. Tīmatahia ana ki tētahi kōrero poto mō te hitori o te whanaketanga ake o te ariā manamanahau taihemanga, ka toro te kōrero ki te rapu i ngā tohu me ngā wāhi whaitika, i te mea ka taurangi ngā āhua o ēnei wāhi ki tērā

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o te rangi o te papa rānei: e whakahau ana ko te whakapapa te ara ki te whakaoranga. Ko te huringa ake anō o te ariā taihemahema te tuku ki te hāpori whānui me te horopaki hāpori, tērā pea he papa hei arotake i ngā mātauranga whakakaoa kia mātau ai ki te kite ki te mahi tahi i ngā raruraru kei waenga i te hāpori whāiti, hāpori whānui tae atu hoki ki te āhua noho a te Māori me te Pākehā.

Keywords: Ngahue; sexual theory; violence; population genetics; bicultural; transitional phenomena; ground; relationship; rediscovery

In 1968, when I was in my first year studying psychology at Canterbury University, Christchurch, I remember being shocked when our professor told us that Freud believed that children were sexual beings and could be sexually attracted to their parents. I went up to him afterwards and asked him if he thought Freud was talking metaphorically or literally and he replied: “Probably a bit of both!”

More recently, reading Thomas Ogden’s (2009) book *Rediscovering Psychoanalysis*, I was struck that he drew attention to an important attitude of Freud’s towards his work, namely that he saw himself as a kind of archaeologist, (re-)discovering ideas. Freud encouraged those interested in psychoanalysis to engage in a similar journey of re-discovery, saying of the work: “I shall not however tell it to you but shall insist on you discovering it for yourself” (Freud, 1916/1953 p. 431).

What does it mean to rediscover something of value? I believe this process is central to every psychotherapeutic relationship and maybe to every relationship of any depth. It is also true of relationships between groups, for example, here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the relationship between Māori and Pākehā.

I learned a little more about this at the NZAP Conference held at Waitangi in 2008, when talking to (the now late) Professor James Ritchie.

James was a foundation professor at the University of Waikato and had a long association with research on biculturalism in this country. He had a close involvement with Waikato iwi regarding their Treaty Claim. I spoke to him about my own bicultural journey.

In my creative world Māori ideas had become important and I was finding myself “playing” with them and developing them, but I felt uncomfortable about the possible “cultural appropriation” involved. James listened to me speak of this and then told me a story of his own.

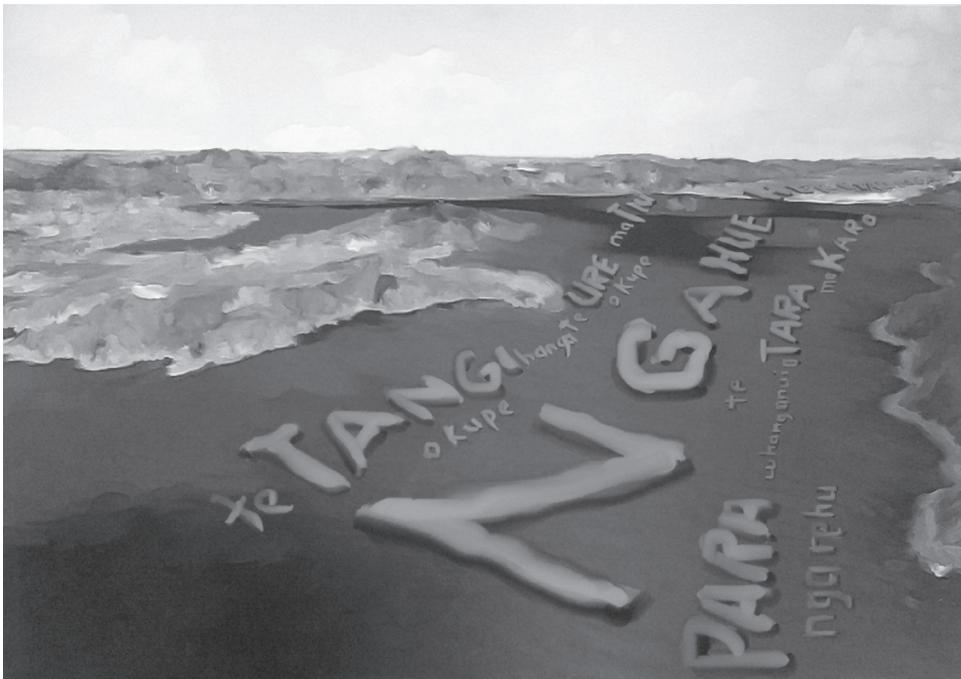
As well as his work with Waikato iwi, he had a close Māori friend and mentor in the far North whom he would regularly visit. They would sit around the fire and talk. James would listen as his friend told old stories of deep significance. Once James shared one of these stories with a Waikato colleague and when this colleague asked him where he had got that story from, James told him of his friend in the far North. His colleague said: “You don’t want to believe too much of what he says - he makes stuff up”. The next time James visited his friend up north he told him what his colleague had said and his friend had replied simply “That’s right; that’s how you find out what the story has to tell - make stuff up!”

I was encouraged by this to keep following my creative imagination as an important

part of the process of exploration and have found that it can help me discover things I might not otherwise have found. I believe also that it needs to be accompanied by well informed evidence and logic which comes from testable theory.

For me there are two broad aspects of the discovery process: the symbolic and the logical. These are not separate but interact with each other in both helpful and unhelpful ways. I believe that they alternate between figure and ground, each enhancing the clarity of the other. For me the importance of figure and ground is the relationship between them which mirrors and enhances other relationships such as that between therapist and client. When we focus on a figure, its ground can emerge (be rediscovered) and vice versa. Figure and ground lie behind relationship in a profound way. As Winnicott (1947/1964) said: “there is no such thing as a baby.... A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship” (p. 88).

This is true also of figure and ground. By way of illustration with regard to the interplay of logic and symbol as figure and ground, I’d like return to my own story following my talk with James at the conference at Waitangi. The talk and the conference strengthened my wish to understand more the ground of my home environment, Whanganui a Tara. One way I have of exploring things that interest me is to do paintings of them. For me this is a focused and meditative process, a relational one between me and the subject that often opens up new awareness for me. It is also a creative process in which I “make things up” and not dissimilar to the process of psychotherapy. I’ll talk about my painting of Ngahue. Ngahue is the taniwha who launched himself from the mouth of the Heretaunga or Hutt River and burst open the entrance to Whanganui a Tara, which up to that point had been a land-locked lake. His path follows that of undersea fault lines. A taniwha is



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often a personification of a great force such as an earthquake — a powerful relationship, if you like.

Ngahue was also the name of the man who accompanied Kupe on the journey of discovery from Hawaiki to Aotearoa. He is known as the navigator; his knowledge is seen as providing guidance for others to follow in his footsteps and those of Kupe.

Kupe's story is recorded in the land forms, and the names of these forms have an intense sexuality about them. At the entrance to Whanganui a Tara is a reef known as Te Tangihanga o Kupe, the grieving or calling out of Kupe. Further into the harbour is a rock, Te Ure o Kupe, Kupe's penis. Across the harbour entrance from Te Tangihanga o Kupe reef is a headland known as Para Ngarehu, the glowing embers, or perhaps a haka with weapons done to clear obstacles. In the middle of the harbour are two islands, Kupe's daughters Matiu and Makaro.

The painting shows the relationship between Kupe and Ngahue, and here is where I am making stuff up. The name Ngahue also means gourds. The gourd is a symbol of fertility and container of all mankind and the hidden lore (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 447). The taniwha Ngahue is believed to be alive today, inhabiting Whanganui a Tara and the seas beyond. He comes and goes from the settling places (Heretaunga) on the shore of the harbour. Kupe is the male symbol of the net of whakapapa and ancestors. The harbour, Whanganui a Tara, is female. Tara, as well as being the name of the son of Whatonga and the chief who settled the harbour, is also a word for female genitals. The two islands in the harbour, Matiu and Makaro, are the children of this sexual union. The name Matiu refers to a rhythmical movement and Makaro to the parrying of this movement; the children, like all children, are literally the personification of the sexual act.

The Early Development of Psychodynamic Sexual Theory

How might this exploration of figure and ground apply to Freud and sexual theory? Freud "rediscovered" sexuality in his work as a psychotherapist. In his *Autobiographical Study* (Freud, 1925), when writing about his idea that emotional excitation contributed to neurosis, he said:

I now learned from my rapidly increasing experience that it was not any kind of emotional excitation that was the action behind the phenomena of neurosis, but habitually one of a sexual nature, whether it was a current sexual conflict or the effect of earlier sexual experiences. I was not prepared for this conclusion and my expectations played no part in it, for I had begun my investigation of neurotics quite unsuspectingly. (Freud, 1925, quoted in Gay, 1989, p. 14)

If that was his logical process, we can look to the Greek myths Freud chose to underpin his discovery; those of Narcissus and Oedipus, to get a sense of the symbolic in his work. These are both stories of a sexual nature and are, in my experience, still very much alive in the vocabulary of psychodynamic therapists. In contrast to this, the scientific aspect of his sexual theory has stayed to a large extent in the nineteenth century.

There has been much conflict and division among those influenced by Freud's theory

since its inception. As a Bioenergetic Therapist I am particularly interested in the conflict that developed between Wilhelm Reich and Freud. Freud was initially quite impressed with Reich, described him as having the sharpest intelligence in the Vienna Society, and referred patients to him. Reich presented his character analytic concepts as developments of Freudian principles (Reich 1945/1990, preface to the first edition), but Freud disagreed with him about his strongly held belief that character should be interpreted before the patient's incestuous desires. At this time Reich was beginning to fall out with some of his senior colleagues, particularly Federn, over his strong emphasis on the centrality of the sexual theory, as well as his emphasis on the importance of analysing negative transference (Sterba, 1953). Reich himself thought that his colleagues displayed an unwillingness to deal with negative transference because of their own narcissism, manifest as their desire to be liked (Reich 1945/1991).

Another area of Reich's conflict with Freud and his colleagues was over the death instinct. Reich noticed how quickly this concept — one which Freud himself admitted was not grounded in clinical evidence — was taken up by the psychoanalytic community at the time. This happened in the aftermath of the First World War, when the human capacity for violence was very much in the mind of Europeans. Reich disagreed with the death instinct theory and was initially supported in this by Freud, who agreed it was important to base theory on clinical evidence and if this could not be found for the death instinct then it should be challenged. His encouragement was slowly withdrawn however and Reich became alienated from the psychoanalytic community.

Speaking to his biographer, Myron Sharaf, in 1948 Reich said: "Breuer first had the energy principle and he ran from it. Then Freud had it and he ran from it. Now I have it and I haven't run from it yet" (Sharaf, 1983, p. 117).

By "the energy principle", Reich is referring to libido, the sexual underpinning of relationship and transference, including negative transference. Like Reich, I think that the intensity of the capacity for violence has a deeply sexual basis. My thinking is that the ability of humans to learn and to socialise in complex ways has evolved conjunctly with the physiology behind behaviours related to our sexual being. As Freud elucidated by taking up the Oedipus myth, our search for understanding is directly related to sex (as was Oedipus's) and specifically involves a journey which negotiates the attractions and perils of incest and exogamy. Furthermore this journey begins at birth or before (as did Oedipus's) and potentially involves us in physical, emotional and social trauma both self-inflicted and inflicted by others. It also involves a logical approach (Oedipus's search for answers) and a symbolic one (the visits to the Oracle). The way we learn both limits our social contacts and gives us the potential for limitless social contact. This contributes to our tendency to inbreed along with our obvious potential to have sex with people very different from ourselves, giving rise to a chaotic pattern of group formation which has a sexual basis.

The death instinct can be subsumed under sexual theory in this context. Our very ability for complex cooperation with other group members carries with it the shadow of inter-group and therefore interpersonal conflict. At its peak this constitutes warfare with those who are or who have become members of another group, and can also manifest within a group as, for example, the conflict between Reich and Freud. When the boundaries

of a group or of an individual are challenged, symbols can both facilitate relationship and contribute to violence when they become concretised. When this happens the 'other' may be demonised and seen as worthy of attack and relationship becomes lost. Reich identified frustration, repression and regression as sources of this loss of relationship and of conflict (Reich, 1942/1970, 1945/1990). I see these mechanisms behind violence and the formation of groups in a way which is generated by their sexual source. As psychotherapists our task is to help our clients negotiate and understand the impact of this process on their own lives, in part by joining them in their life's relational journey.

The Population Genetic Model and its Implications

I want now to introduce a concept drawn from population genetics which I think gives a more comprehensive grasp of this, and brings up to date the nineteenth century anthropological and genetic ideas which Freud drew upon. Population genetics shifts the focus away from the sexual act and interprets sex in a broader context. What it predicts is well covered by Reich's sex-affirmative stance and his focus on negative transference, but deepens our understanding of the connections of this to violence. In this regard it has similar implications to those of the Oedipus story.

In 1945 Sewall Wright proposed a population genetic model which takes head-on the often vexed question as to how the genes responsible for social behaviour can have evolved. He pointed out that in a randomly breeding population such genes would be lost, as on the individual level genes for social behaviour are disadvantageous to individuals bearing them. Wright saw a solution in the concept of neutral genetic drift, which is the process whereby a particular gene or group of genes can become fixed in a population in the absence of selective pressure. He proposed a model of a population structure which allows the selection of the genes behind social behaviour: one divided into small, inbreeding groups. This allows these genes to become fixed in a small group on a chance basis, free of selective pressure, and by conferring their benefits to that group, increase its breeding success and their own prevalence. If there is a small amount of outbreeding the genes are then spread to other groups and can eventually become fixed in the population as a whole.

The small group is a genetic group and can remain small in many ways. For example, group members' access to sexual relationships in a much larger actual group may be limited through repression, both psychological and social. This may happen by such practices as monogamy, polyandry and polygamy, driven by both repression and regression. There are also factors which encourage sexual relationships within a group (inbreeding) and which discourage them outside the group. These may range from cultural and language barriers, to the imposition of repressive rules by members of a group regarding sexual relationships with 'outsiders'. In 1970 Grey conducted a survey of the literature then available and found strong evidence for a number of factors which lead to inbreeding by influencing partner choice. These ranged from premarital residential propinquity to similarity in race, age, religion, social status and physical and psychological characteristics. Then there is aggression and its role in limiting sexual relationships and therefore in keeping the breeding group small. Aggression can arise from the frustration

derived from both repression and regression and serves to keep strangers out of the breeding group and also to limit the access to sexual relationships of group members. Aggression has often been identified as functioning as a protective mechanism; however the killing of our fellows has little adaptive advantage unless we see it as a mechanism which fosters genetic drift by maintaining a small breeding group size. Aggression occurs at boundaries, both group boundaries and interpersonal ones, and this points to both its function and its mechanism. Significantly, boundaries exist also between generations, something which Freud explored in his study of the implications of the Oedipus myth. If the group is to remain small while containing several generations, younger generations must move out of the group or displace elders within it. I see the nature of the “small group” population structure as following chaotic patterns, rather like the weather. This means that the patterns for each individual are unique and can only be unravelled with individual attention — this is one role of psychotherapy perhaps. We sometimes meet up with these chaotic patterns through phenomena such as synchronicity — one important symbolic aspect of therapy. I believe that the understanding of sexuality as the ground for human relationship is deeply imbedded in the unconscious, can help us negotiate the symbolic phenomena involved in our relationships and lessen the chance of violence. Sexual theory can also be developed consciously by the process of rediscovery, making things up, and grounding them in reality.

As Freud put it: the ego is first a bodily ego, and both body and ego are structural phenomena. This can obscure the transitional or relational nature of the Self and of the energetic phenomena of the body. Just as it is possible to concretise a transitional phenomenon and fight for it and defend it, so we can identify with our ego or our body and do the same. This is an aspect of the phenomenon of regression. I suspect that regression is one of the important evolutionary phenomena which foster genetic drift.

When our politicians say such things as “Either you’re for us or against us” we can recognize that they have regressed to a primitive ego state involving splitting. Similarly when someone speaks of the fight between good and evil something similar is going on. Such expressions can foster the ungrounded process of denigrating and objectifying others and by characterising them in this way place them ‘outside the group’ and unavailable for relationship.

The ego and the body are the product of developmental experiences and as such are a reflection of the past. One way of understanding and analysing this past is through the concept of character structure. By building a relationship with the past in this way, we are less likely to become captured by it and become regressed. Again, I believe it is helpful to remember the sexual nature of the development of character structure which Freud proposed and which Reich and then Lowen (1975) developed. The Oedipus myth refers to this developmental process when Oedipus answers the riddle of the Sphinx by naming the human developmental process.

Another aspect of the past that resides in our ego structures and our bodies is that of repression. The processes of denigration and objectification that result from repression block grounding and relationship and feed “the cycle of violence” (Widom, 1989). Denigration and objectification are not just primitive regressed processes, they are also processes which impact us from outside — we are objectified — and this is often

internalised as part of our ego structure. If we identify with that internalised or introjected ego structure, then we act by repressing others or ourselves. Repression can be understood from the perspective of population genetics as another mechanism which functions to keep the breeding group size small and fosters the process of genetic drift.

Where there is repression there is frustration. With frustration the sympathetic nervous system kicks in for better and worse. This is a major source of fighting and again can be seen as a small breeding group maintenance mechanism.

Winnicott (1953) wrote in detail about what he called “transitional space”, and it has become the focus of much thinking about the psychotherapeutic relationship. This is an area where imagination and truth intermingle. The child, Winnicott noticed, makes use of “transitional objects” during this process. These, whatever form they might take, create a third or intermediate area of experience which is neither subjective nor objective and which endures throughout life: “in intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (Winnicott, 1953, p. 14).

We are aware of the tenacity with which a child can cling to its beloved blanket or soft toy, and as adults we similarly cling to our transitional objects — ideas and values. Just as the child returns to its soft toy in times of anxiety, so do we as adults return to our values and ideas and lose sight of their transitional nature. This concretisation or reification of a process can become the source of conflict. Equally, when we remain aware of the symbolism of these ideas and values, they can help us negotiate transitional space. Then we can experience the energetic flow which is the transitional phenomenon. Reality exists in this relational process and any freezing or concretising of it results in a loss of grounding and a simultaneous loss of contact with reality. This loss of contact with reality can be understood as serving the function of maintaining the small breeding group, and points to the sexual nature of the process which Freud rediscovered. When we inhabit a grounded body, transitional phenomena, including myths such as that of Oedipus, become available to us as guides and help inform the relational dynamics with our clients. The myth of Oedipus stands as a warning against trying to ‘work things out’ with our heads. It indicates that Oedipus’s attempt to do so led to him becoming further ensnared in the trap he was trying to free himself from; the trap of the past. As a Bioenergetic Therapist I see this past embodied in the character structure of my clients and work with them to help them become freer from it. If we are not going to ‘work it out’ with our heads, how do we approach this awareness? Firstly, I believe we need to become aware of what doesn’t work in our behaviour and that of our clients. Attempts to get rid of character structure are a case in point. Our job is to learn to relate to the past and character structure and to maintain relationship with it. As we do this we enter more fully into relationship with our clients and the relational process becomes our guide (much like Ngahue perhaps). From a population genetic point of view, rather than becoming combative with the way our genetic structures shape our behaviour, we can observe it and through this attentive process become free of it and free within it.

The psychoanalyst Hans Loewald (1979) had an interesting take on the Oedipus story in this regard. He saw it as describing a mechanism by which culture is maintained. If we simply introject our culture it becomes rigid and stultified and eventually dies. He saw it as the task of each generation to kill off the culture and rediscover it themselves. We can

understand this, perhaps, as containing a paradox. If we can acknowledge our desire to kill our culture and its representatives, this frees us to relate to the culture more deeply and autonomously. Perhaps this is also true of our relationship to cultures other than our own. If we can face our desire to kill them we can free ourselves to relate to them at a deeper level. Let's not be scared by our murderous intent! This means facing our sense (or the reality) of being oppressed or repressed by a culture, including our own, and acknowledging our own frustration in the face of this. These are not things we can get rid of — they are part of who we are, but by understanding them we can transcend them.

Similarly, the myth of Narcissus speaks of our need to become attached to our own image (a primitive version of our culture perhaps) and our willingness to reject those who do not have the ability to relate to this image meaningfully. A partial reflection (as provided by Echo) is not enough. Again, if these needs can be recognized, they can be transcended.

The bicultural arena gives us the chance to explore these issues. As the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists continues to develop a relationship which includes *tangata whenua*, in the last two years' conferences this has included providing a space for Māori healers to practice their art. Delegates were invited to drop in if they feel called to. I have responded to this call and have been surprised how much at home I felt there. It had many similarities to a Bioenergetic workshop, with mattresses on the floor and physical and energetic work and talk all going on. One of the elders spoke of a central concept in the healing work: that of *wairua*. *Wairua* is often translated as spirituality, but the elder broke down the meaning for us. *Wai* can be understood as a stream, in this case a stream of energy, and *rua* refers to two — the two streams. One stream he described as the soul stream; individual presence free from obstruction. The other stream he described as the ego stream, which contains history. The task of the healer, he said, is to stand in the soul stream. When we do this, the ego stream becomes more visible to us and the next task is not to get caught up in it, but to reflect it and to stay in the soul stream. To me, this describes my job as a therapist fairly well: being grounded (Lowen, 1975) enables me to stay standing as best I can in the soul stream, maintaining relationship and experiencing transitional phenomena as part of it. An understanding of my ego or character structure enables me to do this and avoid becoming caught up in the processes of regression, repression and frustration.

Clinical Implications

I'd like to explore the clinical implications in terms of the two categories I have been using up to now; the logical and the symbolic. I believe these processes interweave in the therapeutic journey of rediscovery. A comparison could be drawn to *wairua* — the soul and ego streams which are inextricably linked. Staying with these streams as they fluctuate between figure and ground involves an awareness of both structure (e.g. character structure) and the flow of movement or energy within that structure (which can often be done with an appreciation of symbolic manifestations in the relationship, including transference and counter transference). This enables both the ability to perceive restrictions in the structure and the ability to play with energy and intuition.

One of the things that first attracted me to Bioenergetic Analysis was the diagnostic system of character structure. Character structure is a concept founded in the sexual theory and provides a tested and testable map for the journey back into the concretised past. Just as the body takes on certain forms as a result of past experience, so does the ego.

When we enter and live out of these structures we are, in effect, living in the past; the past is reawakened, not just in the form we live from, but also in our perception of the world. By understanding this as a universal phenomenon; part and parcel of what maintains the process of genetic drift, I try not change character structure or get rid of it but to relate to it. This relationship is in the present and involves understanding the transference and counter-transference; seeing and feeling it while holding a present-centred orientation. Intuition and mythology are an important help in this process. Staying grounded in the body while doing this is essential. Grounding allows me to experience bio-energy as a process or a relationship. When I concretise this process and lose its metaphorical nature, I become ungrounded. Conversely, when I am well-grounded I am less likely to make a relationship into a “thing”. This is particularly true when dealing with negative transference. I recognise that I am becoming ungrounded when I find myself thinking or talking about a client as if they were their character structure, for example, “a narcissist”, and I notice that I am more likely to do this in the face of negative transference. If, on the other hand, I am able to stay grounded and avoid entering and living from my own narcissistic character structure, I am more able to work with symbolism, including sexual symbolism, as a ground for the client’s transformation.

Outside the therapy room, I believe it is possible to bring a similar awareness to relationships in general, including those with colleagues from different theoretical persuasions and also those with our Treaty partners.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to track two aspects of the sexual theory which lie in the history of our profession as psychotherapists and to affirm Reich’s call to Freud not to abandon the sexual theory. One of these aspects is the logical and the other the symbolic. I have noticed possible links to the Māori concept of wairua (the two streams). The Māori healer’s job is to stand in the soul stream and observe the ego stream emerge from the unconscious and to work so as not to get caught up in the ego stream — the manifestation of the past. To me this is similar to our work as therapists. By maintaining grounding in ourselves and encouraging it in our clients we are able to help them understand themselves and their structures, mental and physical, to build relationships with these structures. This allows the structures to be updated. Grounding is a dynamic process and in my experience involves the ground shifting from logical or theoretical to intuitive or symbolic. Each of these can then enhance the experience of the other and allow greater clarity and freedom.

Have I made stuff up? Did Freud make stuff up with the sexual theory? I believe that the understanding of sexual theory as a ground for human relationship is deeply imbedded in the unconscious and can help us negotiate the symbolic phenomena

involved in our relationships, and lessen the chance of violence. Sexual theory is also a figure that can be developed consciously by the process of rediscovery, making things up, and grounding them in reality.

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Rod Sandle has belonged to NZAP for 27 years. He is past President of The New Zealand Society for Bioenergetic Analysis. He studied Psychology and Zoology at the same time and has retained an interest in the links between them. He is a Certified Transactional Analyst as well as a Certified Bioenergetic Therapist, so his own psychodynamic whakapapa includes Wilhelm Reich and Paul Federn, who were at irreconcilable loggerheads. Reich was a therapist of Alexander Lowen, who went on to develop Bioenergetic Analysis, and Federn was therapist of Eric Berne who developed Transactional Analysis, theories which Rod has found remarkably compatible. Contact details: rodsandle@clear.net.nz.