

The Energy in the Room: Bodies Behaving Weirdly

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ABSTRACT *This paper elaborates Totton's claim that subtle energy throws into question our separateness as bodies. It examines embodied experience of "the energy in the room" and argues that, however such a quality of experience is theorised, understanding its dynamics is of importance to psychotherapists of different theoretical orientations. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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It used to be said that one should never, in polite company, talk about religion, sex or politics. Psychoanalysis is an arena outside ordinary social discourse and one in which different rules apply; yet it also has its own taboos – and, as most of the few writers on the subject point out, one such taboo is the paranormal. Nick Totton, whom this special issue honours, is one such writer, and has broken this taboo more than once (Totton, 2003a, 2007) and, as editor of *Psychoanalysis and the Paranormal: Lands of Darkness* (Totton, 2003c) has also encouraged others to do so, too.

Totton presented this book as a “sequel, update or response” to George Devereux’s (1974) publication of *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, noting that the word “occult” had somewhat different connotations in 1953 than it does today. Psychoanalytic interest in the “occult” peaked in the late 1940s and 1950s and, as Totton (2003b, p. 4) observed: “Thereafter – silence.”

BIRDSONG AND SILENCE

Totton (ibid.) traced this ominous silence to an exchange in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* between Jule Eisenbud (1955, 1957) and Charles Brenner (1957) about the frequency – or otherwise – with which worm-eating warblers visited New York’s Central Park. A client of Eisenbud had dreamt that he had seen a worm-eating warbler in Central Park and, on waking at 5 am, had gone to the park and – you guessed – seen a worm-eating warbler. Eisenbud (1955) had suggested that this was an example of psi or paranormal phenomena. In response,

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Brenner (1957) wrote an article disputing the claim that worm-eating warblers were unheard of in Central Park at that particular time of year, thus dismissing the case as evidence of extrasensory perception. Eisenbud (1957), in turn, produced copious ornithological evidence to the contrary, and argued that, although actually the warbler *was* rare at that time of year, his point was that there was clearly a relationship between his client's dream and what, for him, was a very unexpected sighting of the bird. Brenner, however, dismissed this by applying what he referred to as his own, "private rule of thumb in such matters: When a thing is impossible, it cannot be so . . . In my view the rule holds good for psi phenomena" (Brenner, 1987, p. 545). In his comment on these articles, Totton (2003b) observed somewhat wearily: "Just as the Church told Galileo, and Leibnitz told Newton, the thing is impossible and therefore need not be considered" (*ibid.*, p. 6)

Brenner's "private rule of thumb" is, of course, a widely held position that arises from the slippage of the positivist agenda from a position in which the appropriate object of science is to prove that which lends itself to proof, to the conviction that if something cannot be proven, then it cannot be. This latter position is as ideological as it is ontological – and has a great deal of institutional power on its side. As such it is a major component in the current phase of Western cultural imperialism, which denies the validity of other worldviews and dismisses them as "primitive" and/or "backward". Those who subscribe to positivism as an ideology seek to impose it at home as well as abroad. Later, Brenner (1987), referring to his dismissal of Eisenbud, rather smugly took credit for ending the discussion once and for all: "there has not been another ESP article in a reputable psychoanalytic journal from that day to this" (p. 545). Although Totton (2003b) conceded that Brenner was more or less right in claiming this, Totton also suggested that the ensuing psychoanalytic silence on the paranormal was due to the shift in psychoanalysis after the Second World War "towards respectability and conventionality" (p. 7). "No matter how hard we try to establish it as a normal and conventional theory and practice, in the consulting room or in the academy," said Totton (2007) in a later paper, "we know that at root it [psychotherapy] is uncanny and subversive; in part, because it is founded on paranormality" (p. 399). It is probably fair to say that this is not a commonly held view. It is certainly not a view that one often sees expressed in the literature.

Totton argued that many of the ideas fundamental to psychotherapy, including communicative countertransference, metabolising the patient's difficult feelings, projective identification, and "the energy in the room", are essentially paranormal concepts, and that by "Simply by using the terms repeatedly until they sound familiar, however, we have managed to convince ourselves that they represent a solved problem rather than an open mystery" (p. 393). Noting that much of the literature on telepathy concerns clients who appear to know the therapist's thoughts, Totton suggested that our denial as to the inherently paranormal nature of what we do – and how we think about what we do – is a defence against "the intimate presence of the other" (p. 397). It protects us, he suggested, from having to acknowledge that we may sometimes be as transparent to our clients as they sometimes are to us and "threatens the comfortable power relations to which we can become accustomed. There is a politics of the paranormal" (p. 395).

Totton's concern is not only with the power relations between therapist and client. He is concerned with the ecological as well as political (as far as the two can be separated) and, as such, also addresses the interconnection between the human and non-human:

Telepathy throws into question our separateness as minds; subtle energy, our separateness as bodies. But synchronicity throws into question our separateness as wills, as units of meaning and intention. It reveals

our actions as details in a much larger pattern, steps in a much larger dance, a dance in which we are partnered with the whole of existence. Paranormal events, especially synchronicities, very often involve nonhuman beings, animals, birds, insects. This in itself is I think deeply synchronous, a message regarding the connection and communion between ourselves and the other beings with whom we share this extraordinary existence. (p. 398)

Totton had telepathy stand in for other kinds of paranormality and so he did not discuss subtle energy and synchronicity in as much detail. In the rest of this paper I elaborate upon his rather startling – and, I think, accurate – claim that “subtle energy” throws into question our separateness as bodies.

ENERGY AND SUBTLE ENERGY

The term “energy” in psychotherapy is, as Totton (ibid.) has observed, “a complex word, in William Empson’s (1951) sense: a nexus, a meeting point of several traditions and discourses in one term” (p. 395). It might be used to mean Freud’s “libidinal energy”, Reich’s “orgone”, Jung’s “archetypal energies”, or, as Totton has suggested, Stern’s “vitality effect”. The term “subtle energy”, with which it is sometimes used interchangeably, draws upon a different set of traditions, including alchemy, yoga, traditional Chinese medicine and theosophy. Any, none, or all of these discourses may be being held vaguely in mind when practitioners from particular psychotherapeutic traditions talk about “the energy in the room”. Totton observed that, when asked to say more about what they mean by this, many practitioners who use the term would say that it is a weak metaphor, while others would say that “there is an actual energy, or at any rate something which I can only experience as an energy” (ibid., p. 395).

I might well be one of the people Totton had in mind when writing this. I think that during the period in which I was fortunate enough to be in training and then supervision with Totton, I probably would have said that there is something which I can only experience as “an energy”. I have certainly used the concepts “subtle energy” and “subtle body” when and in writing about a stratum of the therapeutic relationship which I consider to be of great importance and to be in need of differentiation (Cameron, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). I now try to make a much clearer distinction between what I experience and the concepts that I might use to articulate my experience. This is not as easy as it may sound. I find myself increasingly in sympathy with the social constructionist position that all experience is inevitably interpreted. Nevertheless, I want to attempt a brief description of what I mean when I use the term “the energy in the room” in the hope that my description is recognisable to the reader. Having worked with “the energy in the room” while training with Totton I think I can say with some confidence that he would concur with my description.

I notice that at certain times, when I listen intently, I feel as though I extend towards my client, as if I transgress the boundary of my skin and reach into the space between us. I do not feel as though I leave the interior of my body, but that I stretch forwards from within myself. It is not effortful. I feel particularly alert and very at ease. Sometimes I have the sense that my client also extends towards me and that we meet in the space that would otherwise separate us. I feel “tuned in”. The session flows. We are both surprised on realising that the hour is up and remark that it has passed very quickly.

Such experiences are not unusual and similar descriptions appear in Pemberton's (1976) research into "presence", Geller and Greenberg's (2002) research on the same subject, and Cooper's (2005) research into "relational depth". Geller and Greenberg's results include two categories that are of particular interest to me. One is referred to as "extending and contact", and the other "spaciousness". Geller and Greenberg defined "extending and contact" as:

[a] process that therapists engage in during the process of presence that involves *extending* oneself and one's boundaries to the client and meeting and *contacting* the client in a very immediate way. Extending is the act of emotionally, energetically and verbally reaching outwards to the client (p. 79, original emphasis)

They defined "spaciousness" within oneself as "a bodily sense of openness or expansion. . . . once presence is manifested, inner spaciousness becomes the essence of the experience itself" (p. 81). Cooper's participants also described a sense of expansion and, in Pemberton's research, two participants described receiving information through the pores of their skin. This all speaks to my own embodied experience and, I imagine, to the clinical experience of many therapists. In all three instances, the research has been carried out with very experienced therapists – for his doctoral research Pemberton interviewed Virginia Satir, and Miriam and Erving Polster, and at some length! The assumption that "presence" is the prerogative of experienced therapists was not examined and so is implicit in their results. My own research refutes this assumption.

My research has been carried out with therapists at all stages from the highly experienced to those at the very beginning of their training. It also differs from the previous research in that it begins with bodily experience. I began my research by "extending" towards a volunteer in a continuing professional development workshop while others observed. I felt as if I was flowing into the air towards her. Then I "pulled myself back in". This felt like sucking myself back into my body. It was not a stomach-clenching, breath-holding tightening, but rather it seemed as if something in front of me whipped around and flowed back into my body through my nose.

The interesting thing is that, although these sensations of extending out and sucking myself back in seemingly happen within the quiet privacy of my own body and mind, what I did leaked out into the awareness of those present and, it seems, created the "energy in the room". One of those observing reported that:

I noticed a change immediately. I could *feel* that something was different. It was as if she had been giving off a feeling of love and warmth which had all of a sudden changed to icy coldness. However, her facial expressions and body posture had remained the same. It was almost impossible to pinpoint what exactly had happened. It was as if the atmosphere in the entire room changed.

In this instance I "extended" and "sucked myself back in" because I wanted to demonstrate something. More usually I might find myself extending because I want to make contact with a client or because I am moved – and I might find that I have retreated back into myself because I am tired, distracted or feeling under par. I know that my client will notice, and I know that they will interpret it in some way. I also assume that they will respond by "moving" closer to me, or further away. A relationship of distance and closeness in the space between comes into being. I suggest that this "energetic relationship" is present in every relationship and every encounter. The research I have cited and my own research are informed by a humanistic perspective; nevertheless, this energetic relationship is also of concern to psychodynamic

practitioners in that it impacts the transference and countertransference. What we sense each other doing at this level inevitably reminds us of the energetic closeness and distance, invasion and abandonment that we experienced in early relationships.

When I experience subtle sensations of extending out towards or pulling away from a client I assume that they will sense this seemingly “internal” experience just as I sense their reaching towards me or pulling away. The knowledge that they sense what I do just as I sense what they do troubles the “comfortable power relations” to which I may have become accustomed every bit as much as telepathy. It is as potentially exposing of the therapist as well as the client. Although sudden surges towards another or abrupt withdrawals are most easily admitted into awareness, I assume that I must always be relatively extended towards, or drawn away from, a client. This is my contribution not only to the “energy in the room”, but also to what my client makes of me. My research suggests that we all, whether as therapist or client, interpret what we sense. Some will welcome the sense of being reached towards and interpret it positively. Others will find it intrusive and interpret it negatively. Similarly, some will interpret the experience of being withdrawn from negatively, while others will welcome it with relief. These interpretations impact what the client hears a therapist say, and what they feel able to say to the therapist.

This level of relationship and meaning-making is important. Conceptualising it in terms of “subtle energy” is problematic precisely because the term is a nexus of different traditions and discourses. The discourses on which it draws are different in the sense of being both various and, in a Western context, “alternative”. “Alternative” is, of course, by definition, alternative to the mainstream, to the ideas that are supported by powerful intellectual institutions that undertake a political act in condoning some models of reality and dismissing others. The ideas that the term “subtle energy” have signified, and, for some, continue to signify, have, since the Ancient Greeks, been caught in the cross-fire between mysticism and rationality, mysticism and religion, and mysticism and positivism. There is, as Totton (2002) has said:

no point trying to fudge this issue, or to pretend that believing in an unrecognised cosmic energy is a minor matter! The cold truth is that, rightly or wrongly, it places you firmly on the intellectual fringes, at any rate until science catches up with you. (p. 205)

In using the term “subtle energy”, Totton locates himself as alternative – and does so as a political act.

Although the discourses that the term “subtle energy” draws upon may be only vaguely understood by many of those who use the term, it is meaningful to many and speaks to a quality of experience that is both subtle and palpable. Whether one theorises this stratum of relationship in these or others terms, it does, as Totton (2007) has claimed, disrupt our sense of ourselves as separate bodies. This dissolution of embodied separation is political in that it disrupts the power relations to which we, as therapists, can become accustomed. It is also ecological in that it dissolves the distinction made between the inner and outer, thus positioning human beings within the greater environment.

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