

Workshop: The Function of Aggression in Therapy

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Introduction

The rationale for this workshop has come out of repeated experiences with clients where there, for want of a better word, 'attitude' has been called in to question and criticised. The result on the client has been shame, embarrassment and rejection. Exploring these experiences has led me to believe that most of the time the client has not had an intention to hurt or scare; to be angry or aggressive. So what is going on?

Of course there are two sides - at least - to the experience. There is a requirement to consider the fuller context and situation and truthfully to do that the best examples can only come from



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your personal circumstances. This is because we never really know another person's experience and are less knowing of another person's experience with someone else.

So, in my own experience what have I had?

In my younger days it was said I looked angry. Nothing was further from the truth... or was it. Once I was in a position to consider body memory and life script I could recognise the hidden anger I carried - my own untouched response; and the way I carried my body in a state of readiness and protection.

So here's a question... was I presenting aggressively?

At school my brother wondered why I never got into fights, why no one picked on me - being smaller and less beefy than him.

My answer was usually that it wasn't worth fighting me, I was no threat to anyone. On reflection perhaps I was too much of a threat, and also too much of an unknown. Unlike my brother I was quiet - shy - I was withdrawn. He, however, was to be blunt, mouthy, quick to proclaim his value and worth - very attractive to the bully!

When I was in training there was an occasion where a group of us were relaxing and chatting away. In the course of this I looked across the room at a member of the group sitting alone; it was a simple glance and acknowledgement of their presence, and I continued with the chatting. Later, in the group, this individual challenged me for looking at them in an angry manner. I was dumbfounded by this and said this was not at all the case. Was it not at all? Was there something about me? Or just all their transference and/or projection onto me? - of course it was the latter.. BUT ... what, in our relational way of being, was my part in the co-created situation?

As I write this a thought come to me : '4uck it, I can't be responsible for how someone else is imagining me!' And that is true.

YET, here is something I learnt a long time ago, when I was first an uncle ... if I talked to a baby they invariably cried ...

My voice was - is - harsh. So I have a part to play in how someone else imagines me...

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Intimidation

I think that what underlies a lot of my experiences is the other feeling intimidated; possibly actually being intimidated. This, despite my lack of intention.

Playing sport, I was aware of being intimidating. I never translated this to off the sports field.

The other - the recipient - IS or FEELS intimidated. This can and probably mostly happens out of awareness by the originator.

My posture has been considered intimidating; my voice has been considered intimidating. I found I have had to modulate my tone down...

"Children of all ages find adults' anger stressful and emotionally arousing; exposure to inter-adult anger may sensitize children toward anger and make them more likely to be aggressive". ((Lemerise & Dodge, 2000, p. 599) in (Staemmler, 2009, p. 168)

Educate for peace

Laura Perls wrote about aggression in the 1939 and the criticism, today, was the constant qualifying of aggression. What, I think this was about was a poorly constructed concept. Yet, surely, this early attempt to understand human interactions are important and probably more valuable for their attempt to understand what goes on with the human psyche. Also, a lot of the work of Fritz and Laura Perls has a backdrop of both World Wars; aggression personified, perhaps.

the demand for peace is in strict opposition to one of the most vital instincts of every living being, namely aggression. By "aggression" most people understand the wish to attack, to destroy and to kill. Therefore they condemn it wholeheartedly, and the general trend in our civilization for many centuries goes towards the more or less complete suppression of this apparently most dangerous instinct

(Perls, 1992)



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These were serious attempts to understand the root causes of destruction and, for its time, there was also the social activists challenging the current order of the day that was considered restrictive and controlling of the individual. As such there was a theme of acting against inhibition as social control. Thus Laura Perls speaks of not inhibiting the child that explores and also destroys their toys. Attention is drawn to the crying, indeed, screaming baby, in later years classified as an aggressive manner, is actually demanding attention to be their needs, from being fed, having the nappy changed, being held, etc.

the average family reacts in the following way: Every overt sign of aggression in the child (crying, kicking, biting, breaking things, etc.) is met by the grown ups with disapproval ... is directed at the child's impatience and bad moods. ... outbreaks often lead to severe punishment. ... The child is told to be good natured, obedient, respectful. ... usually achieved either by appealing to the child's fear of trouble and punishment or to his desire to be loved. ... for hundreds of generations people have been brought up in this way, we must admit that the results are rather disappointing. ... scrutinize the common conception of "aggression." ... child's aggression causes grown ups a lot of inconvenience and annoyance. Therefore it as undesirable and try to break the child's will. ... also of suppressing his curiosity and his inquisitiveness. ... curiosity and inquisitiveness are indispensable conditions for the child's intellectual development, complete suppression of aggressiveness causes intellectual inhibition ... leads to the impossibility of critical thinking. (Perls, 1992)

There is, then a need to re-examine not so much the defining of aggression in today's society, though I think there does need to be an appraisal and redirecting of meaning, but most importantly the need to re-examine on behalf of our clients what socially has been labelled aggression to a more appropriate and healthily assessment of their psyche.

the power to think, to criticize, to understand are only differentiations of the same aggressive instinct. an instinct cannot be repressed, only its expressions. aggressive energies remain the same and have to find an outlet. In some cases they may become invested in the resistance against aggression, ... Frequently the repressed aggressive energies come out in two most undesirable phenomena: neurosis and delinquency. ... we revise our conception of "aggression."

Aggression is not only a destructive energy, but the force which is behind all our activities, without which we could not do anything... not only makes us attack, it also makes us

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tackle things: does not only destroy, it also builds up: not only makes us steal and rob, it also lies behind our endeavors to take hold and to master what we have a right to. (Perls, 1992)

Laura Perls always talked of aggression in terms of both motivation and behaviour and with no further exploratory thinking was not able to encompass anything further in the development of the role of aggression.

Motivation

Motivation is of primary importance in the evaluation and assessment of our work with clients, and I often think that behaviour does not actually provide for evaluating motivation.

The work of Jaak Panksepp (Van Nuys, 2013) investigating brain stimuli of emotions has established the primal emotions and their location in the brain. This work establishes different motivational systems are operating for different sets of emotion. Through his work he has charted seven networks of emotions that divide into two categories of Reward and Punish:

Rewarding	Punishing
SEEKING	RAGE
LUST	FEAR
CARE	PANIC/GRIEF
PLAY	

Of particular significance for the work of Laura Perls is the provision to place her view of aggression with regard to behaviour and motivation. This work of Panksepp can be used to place the behaviours described by Perls across the emotion networks of Seeking and Rage:



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Perls		Panksepp
Curiosity, Inquisitiveness, Tackling problems, mastering tasks,	Intention	SEEKING
Biting, kicking, scratching, breaking, Physical aggressiveness, attacking, stealing	Behaviour	RAGE

Intention - Motivation

Psychoanalyst, Lichtenberg (1989), has defined 5 motivational systems:

- (1) the need for psychic regulation of physiological requirements,
- (2) the need for attachment and later affiliation,
- (3) the need for exploration and assertion,
- (4) the need to react aversively through antagonism or withdrawal (or both), and
- (5) the need for sensual enjoyment and sexual excitement.

(Lichtenberg, et al., 1992, p. 1), see also (Lichtenberg, 1989)

Of these 5 motivational systems there is a correlation of 3 and 4 with Panksepp and Perls

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Perls		Panksepp	Lichtenberg
Curiosity, Inquisitiveness, Tackling problems, mastering tasks,	Intention	SEEKING	(3) the need for exploration and assertion
Biting, kicking, scratching, breaking, Physical aggressiveness, attacking, stealing	Behaviour	RAGE	(4) the need to react aversively through antagonism or withdrawal (or both)

So here we have a coming together of ideas that on the one hand wants to recognise aggression, particularly, as having positive attributes for living and the development of research that supports a number of motivation dynamics that allow us to recognise the complex emotional and behavioural make up of our felt states; and nothing has been explored from the position of socialisation.

For me, any exploration needs to (always) have the context of intention. What is the intention of this person that is 'being aggressive'?

Aggression – v – Assertiveness

I have avoided defining aggression and have sought to concentrate on experiences. The purpose in this has been to evolve a meaning and description for aggression.

Talking about aggression inevitably leads to anger being brought into the conversation, along with assertiveness and rage. Anger and aggression are often linked together and considered to go hand in hand. Has aggression, and indeed anger, been discriminated against? Have they had a bad rap? (Sommers-Flanagan, 2013)

Aggression

in everyday speech and in scientific psychology "aggression" usually denotes an offensive attack intending the infliction of harm – frequently associated with emotions of anger or rage – either on an interpersonal or an international level

and



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Aggression, either in subtle or direct ways, aims to demean or harm another

(Staemmler, 2009, pp. loc 479, 705)

Here, I believe, is where we need to focus our attention when we examine a situation that we are involved in, or when we are with a client's situation. What we can take from this definition of aggression is the intentionality of the behaviour – to demean, to harm.

Assertiveness

assertiveness aims to put one's own needs or wishes forward and not to harm another

(Staemmler, 2009, p. loc 705)

The intentionality of assertiveness is different from that of aggression. With assertiveness the intentionality of the behaviour is of the person's own needs to be put forward.

Holding this in mind I believe that most situations, especially in therapy, actions of (supposed) aggression are in fact acts of assertion.

To be referred to as aggressive may in fact be nothing more than being persecuted, bullied and intimidated simply because the purpose of referring to you as aggressive is, in fact, to demean you! What you had (probably) trying do be doing was assert yourself to be heard.

Aggression and Curiosity

From a humanistic, relational and therapeutic position the function of aggression allows for both the preserving of a sense of oneself and the reaching out to contact the environment. If we begin to consider (perhaps more accurately reconsider) that any action taken requires our energies to be stirred, for our being to be activated, to be awakened. With interest aroused we are able to respond from a release of energy and bring this into the situation. This release of energy for interest is the act of aggressing; aggressiveness to stir into a particular, chosen action.

Describing the role of aggression as this release of energy reframes the function of aggression as the required shift of energy that allows for the figure of interest to become a part of the individual's situation; bringing into personal view for proactive exploration, curiosity and interest.

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Therapeutic Meeting of Aggression

First and foremost at this point is to recognise that mostly the perceived aggression is most likely to be poor functioning assertion. And it might be anger; rage. Reframe the terminology away from the use of the label aggression. Whilst doing so also relate anger to be in pain, and hurting; and rage as frustration and a young age response in which the person does not feel any environmental containment.

Anger

is to be met with a serious enquiring response. Consider this:

Sometimes, we are faced with a person whose barbarity or hostility draws us into confrontation. We feel a strong urge, abetted by the joy of righteous indignation, to attack and correct. The result is reasonably predictable: Our effort only incites the other's antagonism. Realizing the rocky route on which we are now embarked and drawing on a repository of alternative voices, can we locate an alternative reaction to the other's failing? Could we in the face of attack, for example, imagine responding with a comment that constructs an image of the other as important, loved, respected, valued? Could we invite the other to work with us in creating an opportunity for his or her "success" in the present situation? Can we invite him or her to collaborate with us in a construction of ourselves as helpful, kind, concerned and himself or herself as important, respected, and so forth?

(McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 34) in (Staemmler, 2009, p. 160).

Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment of the client begins with attunement to the client's affect, needs, rhythm, and developmental level. It says to the client, "Yes, you are who you are; you really are experiencing this; I'm aware of your thoughts and feelings and needs and they matter to me." In acknowledging the client's presence, the therapist too becomes present. (Erskine, et al., 1999, pp. 86-87)

All this tells the client they are important and their anger is being responded to with certainty and genuine concern to know.

This reflects the emotional networks of Rage, on behalf of the client, and Seeking, on behalf of the therapist. Whilst the client is engaged in Rage they are unable to initiate the Seeking



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emotional network since these two networks are oppositional; like a toggle switch where only one can be 'on'



This design allows only one switch in the ON position. A shift to therapeutic growth with your client will not happen until the Rage network is switched off; allowing the Seeking network to switch on.

Seeking	Rage	
Off	Off	✓
On	Off	✓
Off	On	✓
On	on	✗

The table above shows the possible combinations of these two emotion networks. What would be interesting to explore is the dynamics of the other networks, and that is for another time.

Suffice, for now, is to recognise that being curious and inquisitive prevents the Rage emotion network from activating; conversely, when Rage is activated the Seeking network is dampened and subdued.

Interest and Curiosity

The manner of your interest is important. There will undoubtedly some part of you that wants to defend and refute the client's angry words. In other words, a demand to be reasonable. However

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this is really beginning to engage your own Rage network. Instead you 'bite your tongue', you hold back and acknowledge and honour the client's experience with importance and value.

Take a serious interest with the client and remember that

"If we examine how anger or hateful thoughts arise in us, we will find that, generally speaking, they arise when we feel hurt, when we feel that we have been unfairly treated by someone against our expectations" (Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 9)

Not Confronting, Rather, Meeting the Client in their Rage

Always important is to recognise this is a person in an emotional state. As therapists we are meeting another human being. So rather than confronting someone's rage it is respectful to be meeting someone experiencing rage.

A person that is quick to anger or rage may never had the opportunity to verbalise their experience or if such opportunity existed they may not have had the support to allow their expression to be unravelled and understood.

As therapists we have the opportunity to embody the client's anger and rage and reflect back the appropriate words that help the client match their experience. When this is too soon there will be no impact; and will always be too soon when the client is unable to see and hear you.

Whilst the client is consumed in the Rage network there need is for you to be actively attentive and responsive, both verbally and non-verbally, to their hurt and despair and mistreatment.



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