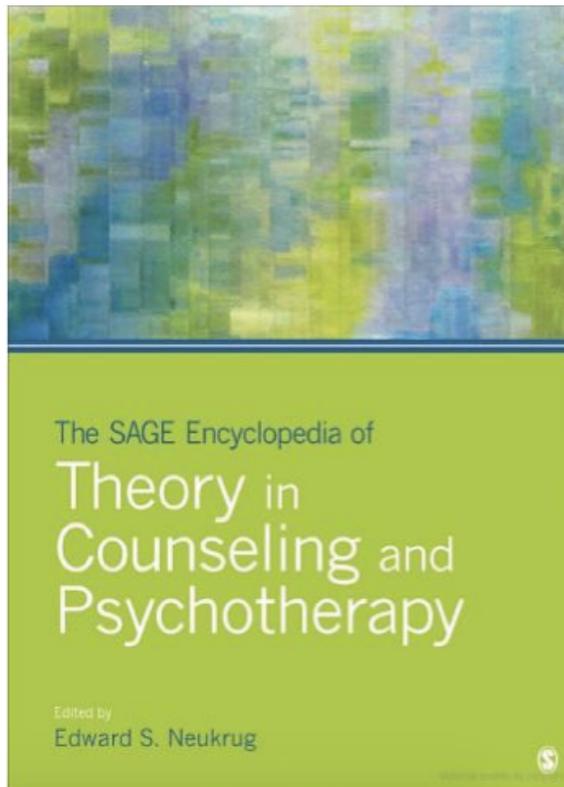


The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy Characteranalytical Vegetotherapy



Contributors: Genovino Ferri & Marilena Komi
& Xavier Serrano-Hortelano

Editors: Edward S. Neukrug
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The term *characteranalytical vegetotherapy* was coined by Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) in 1935 in Oslo, Norway, and describes his method for the practice of psychoanalysis. He introduced significant modifications to both the concept of setting and the clinical tools used. These would subsequently form the basis for the so-called body-oriented psychotherapies.

Characteranalytical vegetotherapy is based on psychodynamic theory and introduces the corporeity of the patient as a third element in the psychotherapeutic setting. The patient's body, however, takes on diagnostic value, with information obtained from the "language of the body" (the word *character* means etymologically "incised mark," incised marks from the object relations in the seven corresponding bodily areas, or "levels"), and it represents a therapeutic guideline. The sense organs give access to the psychic functions and, together with the analysis of the characterological traits of the patient, provide insights that, then, suggest possible corrective experiences. All of this occurs in the psychotherapeutic setting and in the context of the most appropriate intersubjective relationship.

Historical Context

Reich became interested in sexology in the 1920s, near the end of his studies on neuropsychiatry in Vienna, Austria. He was fascinated by Sigmund Freud, and his approach to psychoanalysis was channeled in that direction from a very young age. He was also influenced by the ideas of the vitalist philosopher Henry Bergson, by the theory of Karl Marx, and by several other cultural and scientific contributions of that time. These included the connection between emotions and the movement of the body (Elsa Gindler and Elsa Linderberg), the relaxation techniques of Edmund Jacobson and Johannes Heinrich Shultz, and the medical investigations on the autonomous (vegetative) nervous system carried out by A. Muller and his team from Leipzig University. Muller's results helped Reich understand the influence of psychism and the "affects," or "moods," in many pathological disorders, later leading to further development of psychosomatic medicine.

Reich joined the psychoanalytical circle of Vienna, but after a few years he moved to Berlin, attracted by the political and social movements that were starting there, before Adolf Hitler became predominant. These events put the psychoanalytical fraternity in a very delicate position. They felt uncomfortable about Reich's radical political beliefs, which led to Reich's expulsion from the newly created International Psychoanalytic Association.

Persecuted by the Nazis, Reich was given shelter by a group of Norwegian psychoanalysts, including Ola Raknes and Nic Waal. He settled in Oslo from 1935 to 1939, where he developed his own contribution to psychoanalysis, which would later be called characteranalytical vegetotherapy. The term would be changed to characteranalytical orgonotherapy while he was in the United States, where he had emigrated in 1939, when the war moved to northern Europe.

Reich, unlike Freud, did not include a detailed description of his clinical approach in his writings. After his death, different interpretations of his theories appeared, with numerous people claiming to continue his work and others who took some aspects of his clinical approach and developed new techniques such as Rolfing, bio-respiration, and the primal cry.

[p. 158 ↓] Decades ago, the European Association for Body Psychotherapy was founded, representing the various approaches that arose from Reich's work, including bioenergetic analysis, biosynthesis, the biodynamic approach, somatherapy, and others, in addition to characteranalytical vegetotherapy.

Characteranalytical vegetotherapy continued its own development and evolution due to the contribution of collaborators and direct disciples of Reich. A few years before his death in 1975, Ola Raknes sponsored the creation of the first training institute, called the *Scuola Europea Di Orgonoterapia*, or S.E.Or. (European School of Orgonotherapy), whose president was the Italian neuropsychiatrist Federico Navarro (1924–2002), Raknes's student and collaborator.

Navarro's work in creating a system of clinical methodology was completed with the contribution of his students and colleagues, such as Jean Loic Albina in France and Genovino Ferri in Italy. Ferri has integrated characteranalytical vegetotherapy with

analysis of the character of the relationship, defining the relationship as being “the third complex living system” that is born from the dialogue between the analyst’s and the patient’s traits. Other contributors include Markus Valimaki in Finland, Clorinda Lubrano in Greece, Bjorn Blumenthal in Norway, and Xavier Serrano-Hortelano in Spain. Serrano-Hortelano has created a differential structural diagnostic method, which permits the application of the methodology according to the structure of the patient (neurotic-adaptive, borderline, or psychotic-mimetic), as well as a focused, psychosocial method known as “brief character-analytical psychotherapy.”

Today, there are training institutes for characteranalytical vegetotherapy in France, Norway, Finland, Italy, Greece, Spain, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Characteranalytical vegetotherapy has been recognized as a scientific modality by the European Association for Psychotherapy.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The clinical aim is for the patient to recover the identity of his or her Ego, which has been stifled by psychic or somatic defense mechanisms established during a childhood filled with deficiencies and repressions that have limited the growing-up process. For this reason, it is necessary for the patient to recover the ability to feel pleasure and to restore the energetic pulsation, regulating the organism and restoring psychosomatic health. To achieve all this, the patient must reach a balance in the autonomous (vegetative) nervous system, through analysis and disassembling the character, which is defined as the muscular armor of the Ego (the mind–body functional identity). In his work *The Function of Orgasm*, published in 1927, Reich wrote that by relaxing the chronic character attitudes, we obtain reactions in the vegetative nervous system. He stated that we also liberate not only the character attitudes but also the corresponding muscular attitudes. In this way, part of the work is moved from the psychical and characterological field to the immediate disassembling of the muscular armor.

Reich considered a neurosis to be not only the expression of a disturbance in the psychic balance but also, in a much deeper, well-justified sense, the expression of a chronic disturbance in vegetative equilibrium and natural mobility. From this perspective, the psychic structure is, therefore, a determinate biophysical structure.

In the characteranalytical vegetotherapy setting, which has been influenced by Sandor Ferenczi, the psychotherapist adopts a more active role by placing himself or herself next to, instead of behind, the patient, which he or she does without abandoning his or her neutral position. The psychotherapist also introduces into the analytical dynamic the importance of the spontaneous attitudes and some corporal aspects of the patient, such as the patient's manner of breathing or muscular rigidities. The psychotherapist thus is able to promptly intervene as required, such as through application of pressure or focused massage.

Reich states that it is surprising to see how the decomposition of a muscular contraction not only liberates vegetative energy but also reproduces in the memory the situation in which the repression of the impulse took place. He says that every muscular contraction contains the story and the meaning of its original creation.

He sensed that there are very different ways of organizing the body's defensive mechanisms and thus conceived the therapeutic relationship to be a dynamic process. He was a pioneer in the description of "borderline" pathology, of the segmental defensive "armoring" of the neurotic personality, [p. 159 ↓] and of the perceptual-optical split of the psychotic. He gave great importance to the development of negative transference as the first, necessary step to achieve real, positive transference.

Major Concepts

Most of the major concepts were delineated in the "Theoretical Underpinnings" section and include recovering the identity of one's Ego, which has been stifled by psychosomatic defense mechanisms; the relationship between character attitudes and muscular responses; reaching balance in the autonomous (vegetative) nervous system, through analysis and disassembling the character; and the importance of focused massage or the application of pressure in releasing tensions.

Techniques

Characteranalytical vegetotherapy was specifically systematized by Raknes and Navarro and related to the seven corporeal levels identified by Reich: (1) eyes, ears, and nose; (2) mouth; (3) neck; (4) chest and arms; (5) diaphragm; (6) abdomen; and (7) pelvis and legs. Navarro assembled Reich's principal techniques, which he named "actings," and introduced additional techniques, outlining criteria for correct use (e.g., time, rhythm, and direction) and developing a clinical methodology.

Characteranalytical vegetotherapy acts on the autonomous (vegetative) nervous system, the muscular system, the neuroendocrine system, and the energetic pulsation—direct expressions of emotional, affective, and instinctive life. It tends toward rebalancing these systems. It induces neuro-vegetative phenomena and emotions, which represent expressions in the language of the body that are essential for understanding character aspects. Verbalization of the sensations, the emotions, and the associations produced, as well as interpreting significant relationships with the partial objects of the respective evolutive phases of the life story of the patient represent successive steps in this methodology.

Being Attuned to the Language of the Body

Particularly, the language of the body is the most significant message in the Reichian psycho-therapeutic setting. It accompanies all the other data on "how" the person is expressing himself or herself: from dreams to lapsus, from symbols to metaphors, from imaginary life to liberating fantasies, and from the type of thought itself to the characterological trait that sustains it.

Actings

Characteranalytical vegetotherapy investigates the body in its significant psychic expression through exercises, called actings, which act on the seven bodily levels. These are specifically selected and performed successively by the patient, who will

experience psycho-affective evolution. The actings reproduce natural ontogenetic movements that occur at the respective corporeal levels that prevail during the evolutionary phases.

The actings bring back the “how” of the partial object relations as they were incised in the corporeal level of the Self at that time and phase, but they also provide insights. They therefore suggest the possibility of a new object relationship in the present. Actings connect the “there-and-then” with the “here-and-now,” the depth with the surface, the unconscious with the conscious, implicit memory with explicit memory, informing, forming, and reforming the mind. They increase cognition and feeling, determining a higher intelligence of the mind.

During the performance of the actings of vegetotherapy, we give priority to “the feeling” instead of “the thinking,” and therefore we respect the organization of the evolution of the human being. An analytic therapeutic project aims at giving the person the capacity to manage his or her defensive armor and characterological combination.

Therapeutic Process

From his essay on masochism, in 1927, which was later included in *Character Analysis*, Reich begins the integration of character analysis with vegetotherapy on a clinical level. He initially facilitates the emergence of analytical material (insights) by pointing out the ways the patients present themselves in the session (e.g., tone of voice; gestures such as crossing legs, looking away, or blushing), as well as more permanent attitudes (e.g., compulsive, masochistic, phallic, or hysterical). He also focused on chronic muscular rigidities (i.e., of the neck, chest, pelvis) [p. 160 ↓] that influence body posture and its internal functioning, establishing a tendency to contraction and anxiety (predominance of the “sympathetic” part of the vegetative nervous system) with consequent bioenergetic and psychosomatic imbalance.

On specific occasions, he stimulated the output of the voice, increased the depth of speaking, modified the way of looking, even sometimes suggesting silence, to provoke emotions in the patient that were related to fears (even unconscious fears), sadness, or anger. By dismantling the defense mechanisms and the stratified, segmented stiffness

of such defensive armor, a more global involuntary experience arising from the progress of the therapeutic process could then be added. One such experience is the “orgasm reflex”—a slight, involuntary movement of the whole body when a patient, lying on the couch, achieves the capacity to breathe fully and relax chronic muscular tensions.

Reich considered these to be objective signs of progress toward achieving clinical goals, while underlining that making the defenses and the armor more flexible or mobile is a very delicate process, given that they are part of the identity of the patient. For this reason, and notwithstanding other considerations, careful, consecutive steps should be followed in relaxing the seven functionally related corporeal segments in a cephalo-caudal (head to foot) direction. In characteranalytical vegetotherapy, interventions usually focus from the first level (i.e., eye, ears, and nose) to the seventh level (i.e., pelvis and legs) of the body, bearing in mind that all levels are interrelated and that partial interventions are not effective. At the same time, it is necessary to integrate the emotional experience through an analytical elaboration of the patient–therapist relationship.

See also [Body-Oriented Therapies: Overview](#); [Object Relations Theory](#); [Orgonomy](#); [Reich, Wilhelm](#)

Genovino Ferri Marilena Komi Xavier Serrano-Hortelano

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