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Sexual Grounding Therapy by Willem Poppeliers

Robert Fischer, 14.04.2002

(translated by Joanna Dutoit, 27.12.2002)

Sexual Grounding Therapy (SGT), developed by the Dutch psychologist Willem Poppeliers, is a body-therapy method with deep psychological dimensions that focuses on the natural developmental of human sexuality and the ability to love over the course of a human lifespan. It also addresses the bonds existing between the members of the “birth” or “original” family unit, as well as those in the extended family and the ancestral line. The intensely intimate experiential working models belonging to this work are rooted in a highly refined awareness of professional and methodological clarity which fosters trust in one’s own sexual presence and in one’s own deepest impulses and sexual desires. SGT can be combined with other therapeutic methods, such as IBP (Integrative Body Psychotherapy by Jack L. Rosenberg), Bioenergetics (A. Lowen) or others extremely well.

My First Personal Experiences

Willem Poppeliers’ sexually therapeutic work impressed me from the beginning. I was already a leader of Sky Dancing Tantra Seminars and was looking for further development in my teaching to increase my sensitivity in dealing with clients’ vulnerabilities and to improve the tangible integration of the work into daily life. During my first SGT seminar, Poppeliers convinced me that he could impart what was needed.

During my first psychological training at the Fritz Pearls Institute I heard the following principle:

“Therapeutic Abstinence is not a question of distance but of clarity.”

The founder of SGT embodies this principle in his therapeutic work with sexuality. He focuses on the theme with intimacy, extreme professional clarity and methodological integrity. He does not accept attempts to evade sexuality. Or as he may express it; “Don’t beat around the bush!”

In most psychological training sexuality is treated with great reserve. I have experienced this myself and heard it from many therapists with different backgrounds. My first seminar with Poppeliers was for group leaders specializing in sexuality. The mixture of self-experience, professional training and supervision brought me a great deal of clarity about the mechanisms of transference within the group and with it more security in my work. The Dutchman illustrated for the group which characteristics in a group leader evoked which kinds of sexual transference from the participants. Or, more tangibly, which kinds of sexual yearnings and wishes the particular characteristics of a group leader evoked in the participants. He also demonstrated how this transference and counter-transference could be dealt with.

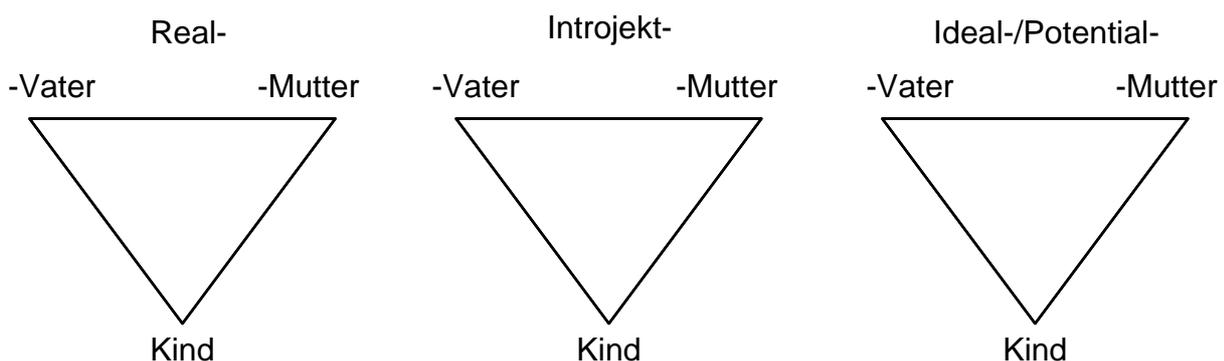
The Characteristics and Emphases of Sexual Grounding

SGT has clear and impressive models and exercises with which to gain understanding of the themes of sexual abuse in daily life and in a therapeutic setting. Specific experiential structures help develop one's own body experience of security and clarity about what is ambiguous, abusive, or contrariwise, beneficial and therapeutic relational behaviors. The "Guidelines" of the FSGT (Foundation for Sexual Grounding Therapy) set out guidelines for the work. They are consistent and far-reaching, even the participants are strongly advised to avoid sexual contact with each other during the course of the seminar, and should it occur, are advised to discuss and clarify it in the group setting. There is good reason for this; the complex mechanisms of transference and counter-transference between participants as well as between leaders and participants. They experience therapeutic structures in which they take on parent and child roles (regressive work).

SGT is actually a systemic body-therapy with deep psychological dimensions and, like IBP, takes physical experience and the feeling of presence in one's own body as central and decisive feedback from the core self.

Poppeliers himself comes from a background of Bioenergetics and Postural Integration. He relates his work to these schools and to the Personality Models of Alexander Lowen. My wife and I include parts of SGT work in our yearlong training "Man Woman Symphony" in which we also include elements of IBP (Boundaries, Agency, Character Style, High-Charge Breathing...). SGT can be combined well with Bioenergetics, IBP and other therapeutic methods.

The Triangle of the Real, Ideal and Introjekt Parents



An important instrument of the work is the relationship to the real external and the internalized parents.

This triangle (see above) is a central basis for the lifelong development of the personality. There has been a great deal of research about which kinds of molding and mirroring are remembered bodily and what influences they have upon one's developing sexuality and one's life. For example, in an SGT session, one might

receive the instruction to find one's place within the original parent –child triad (the parents being embodied by other participants) and to notice and describe one's physical sensations in the genital and heart areas. Finally, the task would be to re-arrange the triad in order to experience the best possible physical sensations. In this work the other participants take on the roles of real or ideal or potential parents. In IBP one would call this Good Parent Message work, experienced in the body, specifically in the heart and genital regions. These kinds of nourishing experiences of mirroring and the positive parental messages often cause deep emotional reactions. For example, the message from a Potential Father to his daughter "I am proud that you are my beautiful daughter, and I give you permission to enjoy the good feelings in your vagina". This supports the daughter in her own sexual feelings even as a child. This can free her of the unconscious search for these missing paternal messages from her partners. The feelings corresponding to these injuries and deprivations can be experienced and expressed. These, as well as the experiences of nourishment and release can be discussed in the group, made more clearly understood and thus integrated. Maturity in one's internal and external relationships to the parents can occur and genital autonomy and unfolding becomes increasingly possible. There is a difference here to the techniques of IBP. The Good Parent Messages and mirroring in SGT are primarily experienced bodily during the therapeutic structures and secondarily acoustically (through words) or visually (through expression and body language). In IBP the messages are given and received primarily acoustically.

The actual parents could only be as supportive sexually as they were able to be. This work with the ideal, sexually supportive parents can help make reconciliation with the real parents possible. It seems to have the effect of increasing the actual parents' ability to sexually support the child.

A participant in one of my seminars about Male Sexuality, in which I incorporated elements of Sexual Grounding, told me of this, for him astonishing, experience; during the course of the yearlong training he had found a new girlfriend. He introduced her to his parents. What happened next took his breath away. His girlfriend thanked them for having conceived him. His mother became sexually vibrant and joyfully described the erotic experience with his father. They both became astoundingly explicit and there was a sexual atmosphere between his parents. He had no previous memories of his mother as being enthusiastic about sexuality with his father (and thus with a man). However, from our work he knew the possibility of sexually supportive parents and was thus aware of the potential and ready to experience it in reality. Did this make the experience possible? The direct experience of his parents as sexual beings gave him support in his own ability to be a sexual man with a woman. Until that point, he had believed that his mother (and thus, all women) would reject male sexuality. For example, with the sexual prejudice; "Men only want one thing." It is enlivening and does children good to experience the sexual atmosphere between their parents.

The Role of Sexuality in one's Lifespan and the Ancestral Line

Poppeliers' work sees sexuality as rooted in and bound to the ancestral line, in the original family, in one's own sexuality and, in the case of a committed relationship,

also in the family of the partner. This is a clear systemic structure. In the viewpoint of SGT a child can experience sexual paradise in reality in that it can experience the world innocently, excitedly and curiously with the support of its parents and other adults. What is often called “playing doctor” belongs to this natural process. In the middle phases of life people seek “paradise” in a love relationship and in the last phase of life mainly in the generational line. That is to say, they feel happy and fulfilled when they can experience and support in natural ways the sexual love within the family system.

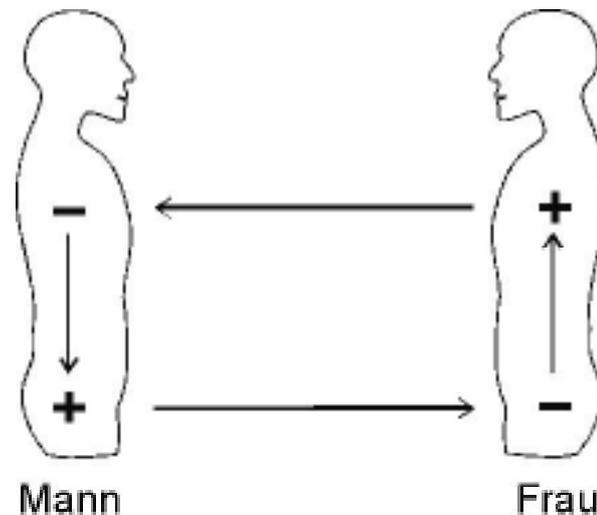
The differentiated and complex theories of SGT on the nature of the development of human sexuality in the different phases of life offer a great deal of insight on fulfillment.

Poppeliers distinguishes 8 different Developmental Phases (Ages 04, 14, 24, ...74). The Basic elements in relationship, curiosity, innocence and the regulation of sexuality differ in each phase, as does the role of the supportive parent (introject).

The sexuality of puberty and young adulthood is often portrayed in the media. (print media, electronic media, films, theater...) This is concerned with the arousal caused by the attractiveness and sex appeal of the partner, with experimentation and allowing oneself to be fascinated by and live out one's sexuality in relationship as fully as possible. It is often said that sexuality in middle and especially old age is not the same as it is in youth. Little mention is made of the richness possible in mature sexuality, what profound experiences can be possible when the partners are no longer focused on youthful sexual ideals. I believe that many people could learn a great deal about this for their later years. Even in death, sexuality can play a role, for example, when a person thinks back reflectively on his sexual life.

The knowledge of SGT provides security for sexual themes in every phase of life. For example, for a couple who have recently come to my practice. He is 78 and she 71. They have been suffering from his difficulties with erection and lack of interest in sex. The wife said; “If I can live a more fulfilled sexual life with my husband, then I will have experienced all that can be shared with him when death comes.” They are a very vital and charismatic couple. I have begun to work with them using Sexual Grounding and with IBP concepts (Agency). I recommended that they focus less on making up for lost opportunities for a youthful form of sexual expression and more on the kind of sexuality more natural to their age and proximity to death. This is generally slower as it is closer to the dimension of eternity. At the beginning of our third session they both had tears in their eyes, moved by the experiences they related to me of the sexual encounters they had begun to share. The man had even begun to experience erections and penetration, though he was still putting a great deal of pressure on himself to have erections and ejaculate. This was the next focus of my therapeutic intervention.

The Masculine-Feminine Sexual Energy Cycle



SGT is based on a masculine-feminine sexual energy cycle such as in Tantra

The feminine energy cycle leads from the genitals to the heart and from there out of the body into the heart of the male partner, from there down to his genitals where the energy flows back into the female body. The masculine cycle is the exact opposite; from heart to genitals, out of the body to the genitals of the female, from there up to her heart and back to his own heart. “Feminine” and “masculine” is usually, but not necessarily, linked to the biological gender. Sharing this energy cycle in imagination and breathing together can already create many wonderful moments together.

Conclusion

With Sexual Grounding Therapy, Willem Poppeliers supplements most methods of psychotherapy in important ways. Sexual themes are made directly accessible in physical experiences in clear, secure and methodologically sound ways, and paths toward further development, the release of blocks and inhibitions shown. Because therapeutic work with sexuality requires particular clarity and awareness to avoid the repetition of previous injuries, therapists require careful training. The method is particularly applicable for the further education of therapists who already have a basic qualification.