


(Self-) Experience and (Self-) Support as a Body Psychotherapist in the Time of Corona: An Essay

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Theoretical Study

Abstract

The essay mirrors the process of self-experience of a German body-psychotherapist who came into contact with the corona crisis already in the beginning of January 2020. The author's close virtual communication with colleagues in China by social media opened up a process of mutual experience and support on body oriented and psychological crisis counselling. This process challenged both: the Chinese colleagues and the author in the way that one had to find a way, a relationship and a (self-) support to navigate without a compass, without a best practice just like living in a dense fog. The author decided to choose the literary form of an essay to invite interested readers to take part as if they were "part of the game". The author is convinced that this literary form is the adequate form to communicate such an experience in such a strange and scary time. The author is also convinced that this form is the adequate professional response in order not to create the impression of "we know what it is all about and we know what is to be done".

Keywords: Self-experience; Self-support; Corona

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Prolog

The beginning is indescribable. I am lost for words, in the truest sense of the word. Was it a tornado that swept over the world? Was it an undertow, a whirlpool that pulled the world into another global state? Was it a chaotic eruption that is both destruction and birth?

I lack the words to describe in more detail what was thought to be impossible. I lack the words, as my senses stagger in a state of blind alarm. I lack the words to describe life, and am paralyzed, lonely, and lost in the time of Corona.

It began unspectacularly. My colleague mentioned that her trip to Shanghai to visit her parents for the Chinese New Year could take a little longer. There was a new virus in Wuhan. Her university in Beijing had arranged for the holidays to be extended somehow. This worked out to be a state of overprotective precaution, so to speak, and realistic foresight. It came faster than expected and unlike any foreseeable possibilities. After all, she could not go back to Beijing until mid-July.

Within a few days, I observed my colleague's dismay, anxiety, and concern about how the virus had developed so intensively and explosively, especially in Wuhan. Remembering the SARS epidemic, I began to suspect the possible impact on China. At the same time, I felt an imperceptible whiff of fear, without this fear having already created an inner image in me of what could possibly be frightening. As I said, it was a diffuse fear.

Psychological crisis counseling in Wuhan

A good friend and colleague of mine works as a psychologist and psychotherapist in a clinic in Wuhan. Of course I was also worried about him. Unfortunately, my messages via WeChat and email remained unanswered, unlike usual. I wondered how he was doing and whether I was right to worry, especially about his health. But no answer, no sign of life, came. Finally, weeks later, I learned from him that he and his colleagues had put together a team of experts immediately after the outbreak of the virus to counteract the psychological distress of both practitioners and the population. The team worked around the clock, 24 hours, 7 days a week. My colleague had not been home with his family for 3 months; he was constantly on duty. I wondered how he could have coped with this extremely stressful situation. I wondered how he fared at the sight of the appalling human fate, the devastating conditions in Wuhan, Hubei Province. I also wondered how he had coped with the uncertainty of facing a virus that was so surprising, so explosive, and so disastrous. After all, it had mercilessly controlled the entire life of the province and the city of Wuhan. Not to mention the extreme medical challenge of facing a completely unknown new virus. In the end, more than 70 million people were in absolute lockdown.

The first phase: beginning support

As I have been travelling regularly in China on a professional basis for many years and feel a close connection to many colleagues, and naturally in view of the extreme strain on the colleagues on site, I offered my support. At that time, I did not know precisely what I could offer, and what would be useful and helpful. At the same time, I was uncertain how my Chinese colleagues would interpret my surprising offer of support. They had not explicitly asked for it. Contrary to my fears, I was met with a response that encouraged me to provide them with Western concepts of psychological crisis counselling, guidelines, concepts, and essentials, and my own

experiences with crisis counselling. Since I was not on site in China, I considered it my task to communicate this perspective through lectures, concepts, ppt-presentations, and concrete supervision talks. This resulted in a very lively, friendly, and professional exchange. Other colleagues from the German-Chinese Academy of Psychotherapy (DCAP) had similar experiences. But the correspondence did not stop at this kind of psychological support. There was a clear need for protective clothing as well as masks, which we tried to compensate for with small deliveries, even if only to a small extent. At times it seemed as if we would fail because of the Chinese bureaucracy. Sometimes our parcels would be at customs for weeks. Despite correctly filled out forms, it took far too long for the packages to be delivered.

A "scary virus cocktail"

By the end of January, it was clear to me that it was not just the virus itself that kept life in China on the move. I began to suspect that the people, life, and politics had been "infected" with a virus cocktail. A cocktail consisting of the corona virus, as well as fear/panic as an emotional virus and viral communication. I gradually began to sense that the impact of this virus cocktail would extend beyond the borders of China. Therefore, I published my impressions in an article "The scary virus cocktail". The article spread rapidly via social media. It was translated into English and Chinese. Even the Peking-Rundschau published the German version. Colleagues who were complete strangers to me helped with the translation. I was fascinated by the viral communication, which made it clear to me how impressive the collegial cooperation was. Even before the viral call triggered by my article was in full effect, I heard the committed collegial and viral echo. I experienced this like a spontaneously developed feeling of togetherness and was reminded of the psychoanalytical concept of the "community of brothers". This sense of community was characterized by joy, bonding, gratitude, fear, support, lively exchange, and insecurity, but also creative energy.

"China-Bashing" as a defense against one's own unconscious fear

In the meantime, the virus-related events in China had also attracted the attention of the German media (mid-February 2020), not only in Germany, but worldwide. At the beginning of February, the first, albeit few, corona infections were observed in Germany. Due to the experience with my Chinese colleagues, I feared an increased corona event in Germany, and increasingly, the spread of the virus to other countries. Initially dismayed, and then also angry, I was amazed at an aggressive reaction in Germany and in the West in general. In a heated public discussion, which was amplified by the media and by politics, the term "Chinese virus" was repeated and often resulted from the, one could almost say, arrogant distancing attitude towards China in which the attitude: "You are bad, I am good" was exaggerated. In many cases there was a "China bashing". As if only China was responsible for the creation and spread of the new virus. In German shops/restaurants, for example, there were signs advising Chinese visitors not to enter the premises. From an analytical point of view, this behavior pattern has the function of a projection. In such a crisis, it can be "normal" to experience such a projection as emotional protection for the in-group to which one belongs against the "evil outside world". And yet I was shocked by the arrogant discriminatory media and political habitus. I neither wanted to hear nor read any of this. I was convinced that it was all about coping with the pandemic.

I no longer understood the world. On the one hand, I remembered the reports of

my Chinese colleagues about the situation in China and the devastating effects of corona infections, some of which had paralyzed my entire life. With what hubris, I thought, people in the West presumed to know better and to be able to do better, and were sure that everything would be under control if the virus were to spread globally. Today, we know better. Today, politicians, the media, but also many people can no longer lull themselves into the illusory certainty that they will be spared by the global crisis. For I not only have the current figures, the dynamics of exponential development, but also the pattern of behavior in mind, despite numerous research results, findings, and experiences, to continue "poking through the fog" scientifically and politically, or "driving on sight".

The second phase: Self-positioning in the social polarization between "China-enemy" vs. "China-friend"

A little defiant, but also professionally and collegially convinced, I tried to communicate the experiences in China within the scope of my possibilities in my life and sphere of activity. It was precisely this time that shaped the second phase of my self-experience caused by Corona. While the first phase was characterized by consternation, astonishment, bewilderment, and friendly support from colleagues, I now experienced myself more one could almost say in a combative, convincing, and admonishing position. I shook my head in response to the polarizing attitude I noticed in the West during this time in particular; suddenly there were "friends of China" on the one hand, and "opponents of China" on the other, corona experts and corona deniers.

In the meantime, the virus had arrived in Germany. After a period of initial hesitation, as well as social and political self-encouragement that everything was somehow under control, social and economic life in Germany was significantly reduced in mid-March. I am deliberately not talking about a lockdown at this point, because it would represent something completely different. Compared to other European countries, there was more freedom in Germany, even though restaurants, shops, etc. had closed.

The third phase: Fear in the "eerie no-man's-land" between waking and sleeping

A third phase of self-experience began insidiously, so to speak, in the transition between my experiences of day and night, between being awake and the beginning of sleep. I thought that I was sufficiently informed about the corona process (as it was of course only possible to a very limited extent under such conditions). I trusted my good body feeling and was therefore able to keep occasional fears at bay. This, however, converted into the complete opposite when I felt like I was in an "emotional no-man's-land" in the evening, still a little awake and not yet really asleep. Who has not experienced this state? You sink into a sleeping hole for a little while, for a few seconds, only to wake up again. A thought emerges, a picture, a memory, which in my case mobilized unmistakably old fears. I caught myself in the over-flooding fear of having been infected with Corona. It was not primarily about what I thought, but about panic that hit me like lightning and I was no longer able to control in the aforementioned "emotional no-man's-land". In this "emotional no-man's-land", I sometimes felt, even if only for a fraction of a moment, a slight itch in my throat for example, or heard myself coughing. Nothing special really, After all, I know my body and the sound of my cough. And yet, as if shooting up out of nowhere, this panic hit

me. Not only did it make me doubt, it also triggered the feeling of an imperturbable truth. I had to be infected. What I felt must have been a symptom of Corona. Fortunately, I fell asleep at some point.

The next day, however, this diffuse panic clung to a subtle fear of death. I felt clear in my mind and fully oriented in my living space, and was thinking clearly. What would I do the last few days I might have before a feared hospital stay? What would it be like to tell my family? Would we all cry together? And would I possibly die alone without my loved ones in the intensive care unit? How would I be able to deal with their pain and mine? What would still have to be dealt with? What would I have to say goodbye to forever, head over heels? And what would so dear to me that I would desperately cling to it?

Of course, this emotional haunting also disappeared again, but I felt wounded in my heart without a wound.

Fear that connects

This third phase of self-experience made me vulnerable to the interplay of my own fear and panic, as well as being affected in my encounters with others. It was clear to me, and I experienced this in each of the therapy sessions or coaching sessions with clients. I was afraid. We were afraid. This silent connection changed my professional life imperceptibly. We talked about Corona and our experience. I was more active in shaping the relationship. I began to ask questions earlier and was less able to endure confidently calm pauses in the therapy process. This happened especially in the sessions conducted online. I felt like I was not allowed to be inactive. As if the client and I needed this kind of encounter and connection. Some people would abstractly describe this as a vital agent without being able to describe this agent in words. We experienced ourselves in an emotional "emergency community", connected with the unexpressed confidence that we would meet again a few days later. In retrospect, it now seems to me as if we had made each other emotionally immune to this uncanny cocktail of viruses.

Experiencing myself like this also aroused in me an almost unreal feeling of insecurity that I seemed unable to name and identify in detail. In such a case, psychology may speak of a diffuse fear, of a floating insecurity, which is characterized by its very own life. This life of its own had taken possession of me, so that my attention was not only tied up, but also in a subtle, hardly noticeable state of alarm. I know this feeling in the transition between being awake and asleep, between normal life and fever. There, however, I experience the insecurity in a limited, concrete, manageable way, etc. The fever also stops after a few days. In contrast, this feeling of insecurity, as I experienced it in the transition between waking and sleeping, seemed to me to be an "insecure insecurity". This insecurity, like an independent being, exists and has an unmistakable grip on me, but is never within reach, is never grasped. I felt unstable, falling into a bottomless pit, moved and fascinated at the same time by the power of this feeling. For a moment, I sensed that this kind of "insecure insecurity" was beginning to spread in my life like a companion, like a shadow, like "an uncanny spirit".

The limited lockdown

The limited lockdown in Germany since the middle of March was characterized by:

- The working structure and the concrete therapeutic/counseling practice had to be

- reorganized, such as
- I was more active and increasingly related to current events.
 - Instead of body psychotherapy in the conventional sense, we practiced psychotherapy.
 - Body support has been replaced by verbal support.
 - Physical expression was imagined.
 - Paying attention to the body took place clearly by referring to the context.
 - The gradual difference in body experience, expression, and relationship building was referred to much more than usual.
 - Since mid-January, I worked increasingly online through supervision sessions, lectures, webinars, etc. This was accompanied by a significant change in my approach. A central question was: "How can I, as a body psychotherapist, continue to work with the body?" I experienced all this both as a very unsettling change and as a challenging inspiration. Without much hesitation, I experimented like a child at play. Again, I experienced myself as an actor, as someone who could influence despite Corona.
 - Even though public and professional life was greatly reduced, and meetings with friends were no longer possible, we enjoyed the wonderful spring in the family setting (fortunately we have a very large house with a garden). It seemed as if we were living on a small island, protected from the possible adverse effects of the terrible virus.
 - Without having guessed the details at that time, I noticed a subtle creeping change of roles between China and Germany. While the situation here began to get out of hand, the situation in China seemed to be slowly, but steadily consolidating, even improving. Finally, our Chinese colleagues offered to send us protective clothing and masks (at that time these medical utensils were a rare commodity in Germany).

The fourth phase: "Feeling of security in insecurity" or the effort of professional devotion

While I, together with my family, thought of myself as being in a private and secure bubble, I experienced two major challenges in relation to my work. On the one hand, I was no longer able to work in the familiar way, as one would expect from a body psychotherapist, while trying to observe the rules of hygiene (mask, distance, etc.). On the other hand, I began to balance between caution that could be influenced and "calculated risk" without concretely knowing of a sensed orientation in myself. Therefore, I continued to work with some clients and patients in my practice. Most coaching processes took place online via Skype and Zoom. With the presence of some clients in my practice, I was aware of the possible risk of infection. In contrast to life in social public spaces, I knew my clients and had an idea of their self-care. If I had the impression that a client could be cautious in a particularly difficult situation, the risk of a face-to-face relationship seemed to me to be "calculable", bearable. Of course we also talked about this. One could call this "feeling of security in insecurity" (I have not yet found a more appropriate word or term for this). Spontaneously and intuitively, but without being able to justify it, I distinguish it from tolerance of ambiguity. This is characterized by something like the "feeling of insecurity". This ability to keep tensions in balance, to be able to live with ambiguity, and to tolerate insecurity or uncertainty is an ability that can ultimately always be based on or relate

to "something safe". Now, in the time of Corona, an emotionally securing anchor was missing when navigating through this absolutely new territory.

In this respect, prudent care and careful planning helped me to find and maintain this balance. It remained a very fragile balance. The immanent rhythmic or eruptive movement and constant variation of this balance could never be grasped or deciphered.

I succeeded in achieving a balance that could perhaps be described as "as if it were safe". With the awareness of the occurrence of corona in the "here-and-now" of the event, I tried to stay aware of any new aspects that might arise. At the same time, I respectfully felt an invisible, but tangible companion, i.e., the hidden, but real "insecure insecurity" (I still do not have a better word for this), which gave me the necessary humility because I did not try to fight it or even deny it in a rationalizing way.

The fifth phase: it is what it is

In the meantime, I had decided on a certain procedure regarding the observance of hygiene rules and realized that I was able to follow this procedure well. At the same time, I also felt a certain humility and "professional devotion" towards the restrictions imposed by this procedure. I began to accept what I had decided, and what the hygiene rules dictated, which in turn led to a reduction in body-psychotherapeutic interventions. I regretted that I could no longer work directly with my body, and that touching was not possible at all. I was helped, to put it succinctly, by the conviction that things are just the way they are. The resulting acceptance of the present, of limitations, of reduction, etc. helped me to stay in balance, not to constantly question myself, or to get emotionally unbalanced. Though I hesitated, faltered, and quarreled, I was aware of the seriousness of the situation, of the crisis, and of the all-encompassing effects of the Corona crisis. In doing so, I met my secret companion, namely the "insecure insecurity" with (perhaps naïve) respect, without necessarily defending myself against this secret "uncanny companion". How could I have done that? He was there and I was there too. He whispered fear, worry, concern, and panic to me, whereupon I, keeping him in mind of course, did not deny his existence, but I did not want to let myself be mentally crushed in the process either. Instead, I tried to respect myself, namely to appreciate what was worth doing. Certainly, it sometimes hurt to look at myself in the mirror and to see a (further) third companion before my eyes. This rather narcissistically characterized companion seduces me again and again in my life with the tempting promise of feasibility, omnipotence, or grandiosity, like: if I do this or that, I can handle the corona crisis in the right way. But there is no right way. The awareness of this very companion served as an emotional warning as well as an inner corrective to stay alert to the danger of subtle idealization.

The roller coaster ride in a three-dimensional loop

Of course, everything remained open and unclear. Every day anew there were surprises. Every day we experienced the roller coaster ride in a three-dimensional loop. Feeling an increasing inner stability and sensing professional security, I felt powerful and proactive enough to continue working with patients and clients. Of course, it was (still today) about Corona. As I have not been able to work directly with the body since February, I use two approaches to include the body. One way is the imagination of embodiment, of encounter, of touch, etc. The other way is the anchoring of the experience, together with the client in the here and now in the therapy session by means of the expression of his/her body without doing any

specific body exercise.

This can be compared to a real experience, which, in my opinion, is of outstanding importance, especially in the current pandemic. This event has a direct, complex, and emphatic influence on the life of the client and me. The same applies to experiencing togetherness in the "here-and-now" in the therapy room. In my opinion, the two approaches mentioned above, i.e., to be able to work with the body in the transferred sense, represent useful and meaningful possibilities for intervention.

The sixth phase: Germany as a national self-experience group

In the meantime, Germany has, in my opinion, changed into a national self-experience group. The corona event has a grip on life, media coverage, economy, and politics, simply everything. In reporting, and also in the reaction to it, a culture of debate is opening up in which there is a competition between corona and fundamental rights. Either one accepts life with all its limitations as it presents itself, or one indulges in histrionic counter-arguments or even hedonistic self-assertion.

Some of the lessons I learnt (autumn 2020) are as follows:

- We are not dealing with the corona virus alone, but with a "scary virus cocktail".
- Tolerance of ambiguity is not comparable to what I call "insecure insecurity".
- In addition to professionalism, professional humility and dedication are required.
- In the experience of the "here-and-now" lies the chance to create your own design or even to make it effective (If you do not judge too early what might be right or wrong).
- Experiencing fear as a mutual fear strengthens what is called cohesion. This strengthens confidence in navigation in such difficult times.
- Confidence in self-positioning, even if in an unknown dynamic equilibrium, creates a sense of perspective. On the fact that something can be done or planned awakes the sense of a spirit to try anew supported by one's own involvement in the "community of brothers".

Epilog

Out of what was initially a chaotic nothing, the time of corona eventually led to a rediscovery of "sensed knowing". After the initial wordlessness and paralysis, staring at what was called corona, words became words, experienced words, words that were shared with others, words that changed to become connecting words, words that were born out of sensual experience, and companions in navigating through the corona event.

These words balanced knowledge and non-knowledge, the feeling of security and insecure conditions, and directly experienced life and virtual communication. These words are always carried by fear, hope, pain, desperation, and a togetherness which, to my surprise, like a precious carrier of hope, united the past, present, and future into a meaningful living and professional space.

This awakened a new kind of self-confidence in me. This occurred across borders. This can increasingly be expressed in new words, which enable me to no longer, as if paralyzed, build up a protective distance from the corona event.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.