



Catharsis in Psychotherapy

P. J. Hawkins, "**Catharsis in Psychotherapy**", University of Durham, UK, Durham, 1986.

The historical context of catharsis in psychotherapy is discussed, with particular reference to drama and ritual.

The 'cathartic technique' of Freud and Breuer is then presented as part of the continuing development of approaches that advocate feeling-expression as a way of promoting personal change. The contemporary approaches considered include Reichean Therapy, bioenergetics, primal therapy, and re-evaluation counselling. Heron's theory of catharsis in human development is emphasized, and is central to the two experiential research enquiries presented later.

The evidence for the efficacy of catharsis is reviewed from the perspective of the various 'schools' of emotionally-expressive therapy, and reference to the the psychosomatic and bereavement literature is also made. Two research enquiries are presented which investigate the effects of catharsis on human functioning.

A new paradigm experiential approach was adopted in which co-researchers engaged in a **collaborative enquiry**. 'Inside' measures of subjective experiencing, contingent upon emotional catharsis, were gathered through self-report, as well as 'outside' measures of blood pressure, pulse rate, and personality functioning.

Results suggest that physiologic tension decreases following somatic emotional catharsis, but that longer term changes in psycho-somatic functioning require the development of insight into the genesis of the 'symptom', as well as complementary therapeutic strategems. It is further suggested that the development of insight is contingent upon historical somatic catharsis.

The results also show that where cognitive catharsis occurs without affective release, an increase in psycho-physiologic tension is effected, as shown in both the physiological measures and subjective experiencing. Finally, the implications of catharsis for therapeutic practice are discussed.

Research Cooperative Inquiry Catharsis

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