

The Double-Loop Experience

By Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

"...All real living is meeting"
-- Martin Buber

The central healing process of reparative therapy is the Double Loop experience. In this process, an accurately attuned, empathic therapist helps the client re-experience the feelings that have split apart his psyche so that he can reconnect with the renounced parts of himself. Those split-off parts of the self have, we find, often been renounced because of conscious and unconscious feelings of shame.

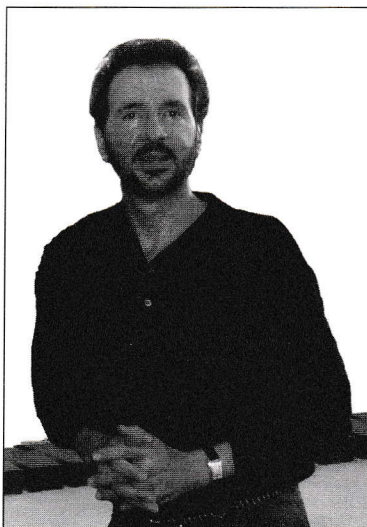
Several recent neurobiological studies have opened a window into this process of reconnecting the person back to himself. These findings suggest that the traditional, psychodynamic view of the division of the mind into unconscious-conscious, unrepressed-repressed, affective-cognitive is anatomically reflected by right-brain vs. left-brain activity. In reparative therapy, these two separate parts of the "severed self" are therapeutically united through what we call the Intensive Body Work of Affect-Focused Therapy.

Neurological studies offer us a picture of the actual reconfiguration within the brain that results after the client has engaged in successful psychotherapy. We might remind ourselves that this new information tells us nothing radically different from what any good psychoanalyst actually knew, fifty years ago. But what is important is that there now is a body of empirical data from neurobiology which reveals how therapy actually works. More importantly, such research will continue to help us discover which interventions are most effective.

The Origins Of The Split Mind

The origins of the split mind—i.e., the making of early trauma—are found in the family communication style that we call the Double Bind. This is the common communications style of the Narcissistic-Triadic Family, a family type that is often reported by our homosexually oriented clients. Double Bind Communication creates two schisms; the first within the self, and the second, between the self and others.

Personal identity development is the cumulative result of years of affective attunement with others. It is through attunement with others that our inner relationship with ourselves is ultimately determined. Traumatic malattunement—the inevitable consequence of the family communications style of the Double Bind—creates shame, and shame detaches the person from himself. In contrast, attunement with the therapist in the Working Alliance (a consequence of the Double Loop experience) resolves this barrier of shame and fosters re-attachment with the self.



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Stated simplistically: the Double Loop experience repairs the psychic damage done by the communications style of the Double Bind. The Double Loop links the person back to himself and to others. Attunement with another person leads back to greater attunement with self.

Intimacy, Not Eroticism

A particular benefit of the Double Loop experience for many men is that it assures them that a felt emotional connection with another man need not be "gay," and that feelings that come up through an emotional connection with another man are healing and affirmative rather than erotic.

The Simultaneous Intrapsychic And Interpersonal Connection

The therapist begins by hearing the client's verbal reports. He expresses his accurate empathy, and responds with respect and care in the moment to validate the client's experience, thus sustaining and completing his emotional integration of the experience.

At the same time, the therapist attempts to establish the second part of the Double Loop—the one which links the client back to the therapist. He does this by encouraging the client to closely attend to his own embodied experiences, while also expressing them to the therapist in the here-and-now. During such experiences, the client is feeling his own emerging emotions while staying in emotional contact with the therapist.

In the early phase of treatment, the client's anxiety or defenses will cause him to shift attention back-and-forth, making it very difficult for him to stay connected both to his own feelings and to the therapist.

One client expressed the task of identifying the bodily expression of his feelings as "... watching a train go by. By the time I tell you the feeling, it's already gone." At such critical moments, the therapist can gently remind the client, "Try to stay in contact with me and also with your feelings at the same time."

The most powerful transformative moment is when the client reexperiences an early trauma, while emotionally present in the inter-subjective moment of the Double Loop. At such times—when all that exists for the two people in that session is the intense "here and now"—we see a re-attachment with the self through the medium of the other. It is through this connectedness

Shame About Shame

with the therapist that the client is able to feel the bodily sensations that are associated with his painful early experiences. The greatest healing moments occur when the client can feel what seems to be unbearable affect, while at the same moment, experiencing the care and support of the therapist. Thus in a process of interactive repair, their attuned relationship alters the neurological structure of the brain.

Communication—the putting into words of his feelings—is not just a cognitive act, but an act of trust. And it is this trust that enables unification between the client's left and right brain hemispheres; between cognitive and affective; and between conscious and unconscious—all through the medium of the body.

This integrative process deepens through the accurate empathy that links therapist and client together in the experience. Thus, through accurate attunement and the establishment of the Double Loop, the therapist facilitates the client's cognitive discernment of his own, long-repressed affect.

At the completion of the Double Loop, the client affectively receives the therapist's expression of respect and esteem, which results in the experience of feeling deeply known and understood. This intersubjective moment is, at its best, reminiscent of the earliest attunement that was felt between mother and child.

Three Steps Of The Double Loop

- Self -- Feeling and expressing authentic needs to the other
- Other -- Responds with affirmation (attunement, validation of needs, etc.)
- Self -- Receives and accepts this affirmation.

Results Of The Double Loop

- The client abandons negative interpretations of his feelings
- He integrates his valid self-needs
- He emotionally unifies with himself and others

Dissipation Of Shame Through Exposure

Shame is what blocks the homosexually oriented man from living in the Assertive Stance. Shame splits the mind apart and divides the person off from himself, while the Double Loop unifies it. The Double Loop experience is the most powerful tool available for disempowering the inhibitory affect of shame. And shame dissipates through exposure, the process for which the Double Loop is ideally suited.

The shame experience contains the feeling of being unworthy of human contact, and so the protective impulse is to hide, to cover oneself, to cower. Internally, shame is an affective inhibitor, a shut-down state. The therapeutic goal is for the client to sit in the shame (including the feelings that surround and underlie it) while he experiences contact with the understanding and accepting therapist (resulting in his affective expansion).

Revealing his Shame Posture to the therapist is often preceded by the client's comments such as "This is gonna sound stupid." "It's no big deal; I don't know why this upset me." Such minimizing and apologetic introductory remarks reveal a "shame-about-his-shame" reaction.

It is the therapist's empathetic response that validates all that the client subjectively experiences in the Shame Moment. This allows the client to surrender his shame to feel his deeper, underlying anger (at the other) or sadness (for himself). How this is accomplished can only be understood in terms of the positive transference and modeling.

There are two therapeutic opportunities to engage the client in the Double Loop experience toward resolution of shame— (1) revealing a past (childhood or more recent) Shame Moment to the therapist, and (2) presenting a Shame Moment to the therapist as it is happening in the present therapeutic setting. Many Shame Moments center around experiences of a deep feeling of gender inferiority. The Double Loop process does not take advantage of therapeutic opportunities to focus on interpretation—however tempting they may be for the therapist at the time. Interpretation is more effectively done after the Double Loop is completed and during the final, Meaning Transformation phase of therapy.

The Double Loop experience of psychotherapy is a uniquely human event between two people in time, and contains a sort of mystical or transpersonal quality with a surreal edge to it. When the client drops his usual defenses, the Double Loop offers a transformative depth of emotional exchange. Forming the Double Loop is not a science; there is inevitably a "hit-or-miss" quality to all intimate interpersonal exchange. This makes the happening of the Double Loop not so much a technical achievement as a truly artistic endeavor.

From Anxiety To Spontaneity

The goal of therapy is to accelerate the client's encounter with his fear-filled affective life. And so the therapist encourages the client to feel and express his anxiety-provoking bodily feelings and sensations, while at the same time, supporting him in maintaining their interpersonal contact. Toleration of this previously unbearable affect will be possible because of mutual emotional attunement between client and therapist.

The goal of therapy, therefore, is the integration of conflicting affects. When the client experiences the reintegration of these once negative-seeming affects, he experiences a surprising eruption of spontaneity, authenticity, vitality, and a feeling of self-integrity—all of which is prompted by the restructuring of the True Self. As the True Self gradually begins to emerge, no longer constricted by illusions and distortions, and no longer bound in the straitjacket of the False Self, we see a markedly greater outflow of energy in relating to others, and far less self-preoccupation. ●