

The four S of human touch

De Bortoli, G., SIdiBP i Italian chapter, via Rugo 21 - 32100, Belluno, Italy,
gigetto@ceisbelluno.org

Abstract

Closeness and physical contact in BP groups are pivotal and constitute the unique features and novelty of this therapeutic practice.

Those who are familiar with Bonding Psychotherapy (BP) or have undergone personal training would indeed know that physical contact is at its core, as it helps building mutual trust and security.

By contrast, those who have never experienced BP may be skeptical and often find its methods unorthodox i a belief shared by many professional psychotherapists, who are often concerned by the sexual implications associated with physical contact. Paradoxically (as seen in the Lisbon Conference, 2018) the risks of sexual involvement between therapists and clients, are stronger during individual face-to-face practice than in group approaches.

It is therefore essential that any therapist willing to follow the BP model, is clear and well-aware of the implications of any bodily contact that takes place in the group. Therapists should be able to internalise, mentalise and distinguish/discern the bodily perceptions of sensitivity, sensoriality, sensuality and sexuality, for the individual's sake as well as the group's.

In the talk, elements from more than 30 years of experience working with Bonding Psychotherapy will be presented, as well as some concepts from the works of important scholars (listed in the bibliography) to address the therapist's need for knowledge, clarity, and personal awareness of the four levels of perception in interpersonal body contact.

Keywords: physical contact, sensitivity, sensoriality, sensuality and sexuality

Foreword

Dear Friends,

Thank you for joining me today and for your attentive listening. I want to start by acknowledging Mimmo Lepera, who recently raised an intriguing question: "How is it that, given the close body work done in BP groups, we never talk about the perceptions and sexual impulses that can arise during the work?"¹ I thank him for this provocation, and I have decided to address it and explore this topic with you today.

I also want to reference Jochem Zimmerman's report from the ISBP Conference in Lisbon in 2018, which discussed therapists' sexual abuse of clients.² What I will be sharing today is informed by my extensive experience in listening and helping, based on leading over 600 two-day groups, including those with individuals dealing with sexual issues.

My goal today is to offer you an anthropological perspective that combines meaning with practical therapeutic and educational insights. This approach has proven effective in various educational settings, including schools where I have taught history, philosophy, and theology.

Data and Facts

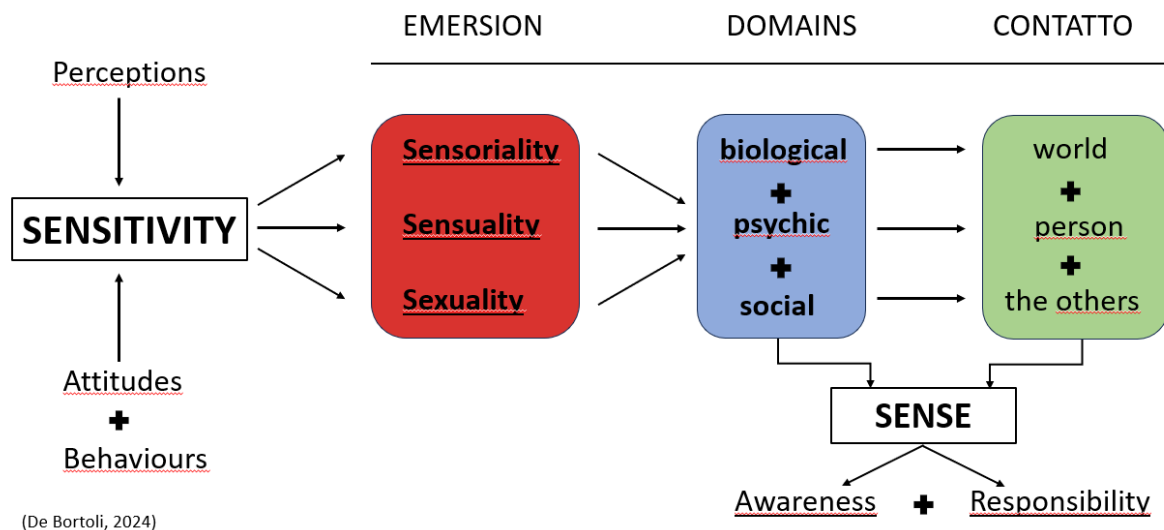
Many people lack proper understanding of their sensory perceptions, which influence their emotions, attitudes, and behaviours. This confusion is often worsened by unmet needs and desires, leading to internalized prejudices and problematic relationships. Managing sensory experiences can be very challenging. They defend or attack, close or open, accept or reject, risking to remain without relationships.

Additionally, the 'sense of balance' is often overlooked. Traditionally, we talk about five senses, but there are actually seven: touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight, pressure, and balance. The balance sense is subtle but crucial; without it, we can experience discomfort and injury, which often requires medical attention.³

Here's a simplified framework based on the Devoto/Oli dictionary (similar in all languages)⁴:

- **Perception:** Awareness of sensory experiences or the ability to intuit. I use this term to describe what people can feel directly. Often replaced by "hear" or "feel", but we need to understand how sensory experiences "emerge" - in what 'realms/areas' of self - and what they connect to.
- **Sensitivity:** Ability to receive sensory impressions - activity of the nervous system which helps us feel emotions even without thinking. It includes both conscious and unconscious feelings as well as the perception of internal and external senses - directed towards the whole.
- **Sensoriality:** How the senses interact with the external world. It involves strong contact with/action in the environment, both material and non-material. It is the perception of the sense - directed outward.
- **Sensuality:** How the senses relate to pleasurable experiences. It involves conscious enjoyment of things that give pleasure, including erotic and aesthetic experiences. Devoto/Oli further specifies: "Subjective or objective condition connected to the solicitations of the senses, especially to pleasure". It usually refers to erotic pleasure but also covers aesthetic and other forms. It is the perception of the sense, directed from outside to inside in a pleasant (but sometimes painful) way.
- **Sexuality:** Pertains to sex-related phenomena and desires. It involves seeking pleasure, always connected with generative love, and requires sharing with a partner what he/she does not have. Perceiving the meaning involves openness to the other and making a gift of oneself.
- **Sense:** A position of consciousness that brings awareness and purpose, leading to a sense of completeness. It often relates to spirituality and going beyond oneself. It is the characteristic position of consciousness that becomes aware in a reflexive and free way, thus responsible, of experiences and life itself. Discovery can be a call to transcendence. In concrete terms, it is identified with spirituality, not in a religious profile, but as an orientation that goes beyond the self. It always involves awareness and responsibility. Perceiving the meaning involves moving from the self to the totality of being in a relationship.

Sensory Structure of The Person⁵



Meaning and Significance

The fourth stanza of the Latin hymn *Veni Creator* resonates with me: “Ignite the splendour of the senses, inflame hearts with love, permeate with stable energy our fragile bodies.”⁶. This hymn from Pentecost reflects the role of senses in life, love, and immortality.

The above implies that the senses are nourishment for the life of the plant and animal world (including every living cell) and they underlie the biological, psychic, and social realms of humans. In other words, sensory experiences are vital for all living beings, influencing our biological, psychological, and social interactions. They shape relationships and behaviours, as seen even in primates like bonobos and chimpanzees⁷.

In my extensive experience, “perceptive aptitudes” have a stronger impact than “sensitivity”, referring to what we actually feel rather than just perceive or intuit (similar to how mathematics works, for example).

It’s key to highlight that in Bonding-work sensations are a) not fabricated by the mind, even if it interferes, but b) are often objective and visible to others as well c) being felt by the individual. They can bring pleasure or suffering depending on how they are received and practiced, influencing comfort or disappointment.

Sensations, in all of their variations, can lead to pleasure if received correctly, or bring displeasure and suffering if received incorrectly (e.g., taste related to nutrition can induce bulimic or anorexic behaviour).

Sensations, while providing objective pleasure or displeasure, are experienced subjectively as either comfort and consolation or disappointment and sadness. This dynamic mechanism has been shaping our relationships with ourselves, the world, and others since birth. The relationships formed through these sensations are deeply impactful, as they integrate and energize the emotional experiences we have. In a group setting, these sensations particularly focus on the primary bodily aspects of the human experience.

Evaluation

When evaluating how to address these issues in BP (Bonding Psychotherapy/Process) groups, the most challenging aspect often involves the sensual and sexual dimensions.

Sexuality itself is straightforward, driven by a biological urge to connect with a partner, despite physiological differences, to perpetuate the human species. This urge is linked to powerful pleasure and erotic sensuality, which can diverge from the fixed patterns observed in other mammals.

From my experience as a group leader in BP, I've found it valuable for facilitators to recognize and reinforce the emergence of the four key aspects (4S):

1. **Sensitivity:** This emerges from:
 - Recollections of past events, especially those involving suffering;
 - Personal narratives and reflections on family, friendship, and romantic relationships;
 - Memories of dreams, which add new layers to initial feelings;
 - Descriptions of sensations experienced (e.g., smells, temperature, injuries);
 - Body-contact interactions and relational dynamics within the group;
 - The environment and the group's approach, which encourages both openness and defensiveness.
2. **Sensoriality:** This emerges from active or blocking positions towards everything that has happened or happens outside. This involves:
 - Reactions to new or diverse experiences, and how one perceives novelty, affinity, or rejection;
 - Interactions with various materials and physical sensations;⁸
 - Physical and expressive activities that engage the senses;
 - Observations of external objects, from everyday items to the natural world (the cover...or the starry sky);
 - The bonding process that brings people into closer contact.

In my experience in Senigallia, a group focused on sensoriality was organized, starting with colours and extending to three-way bonding exercise. (active and passive sensoriality such as papy, mamy, children). Typical of sensoriality is to turn one's attention and attitude to everything else. The BP group fuels the desire to do this, but not always.⁹

3. **Sensuality:** This relates to:
 - The personal enjoyment and desire for pleasure, influenced by past experiences and current practices.
 - Reactions to behaviours and situations that have been censured or judged. (e.g. "Things that give pleasure are wrong and forbidden").
 - Addictions and lifestyles focused on securing pleasure.
 - Relational and emotional eroticism.

While eroticism of a sexual nature often remains marginal in BP groups, it can influence dynamics of acceptance and rejection, impacting relationships. Addressing and discussing these topics can enhance romantic and love relationships.

4. **Sexuality:** This emerges in:
 - Perceptions of problems and failures in relationships, including homosexual ones.
 - Detailed recounting of events, though it often stays in the background during BP group sessions.

- The potential for sexual intimacy and desire, which can be triggered by physical contact or empathy, stimulating sensuality.¹⁰

By understanding and addressing these aspects, group leaders can better support participants in navigating their sensory, sensual, and sexual experiences.

Choices and Decisions

In BP groups, it's important for the group leader to help participants stay aware of their feelings and support them in noticing any changes. As people engage with their senses, their awareness and decisions will also evolve.

One of the most challenging aspects is managing issues related to sensuality and sexuality, which can come up due to physical contact in the group. Here's how to handle it:

1. **Encourage Open Communication:** Participants should feel comfortable discussing their feelings and impulses openly. This helps manage and address any issues. Inform both the facilitator and the partner about what's happening, and encourage conversations with the bonding partner if needed. Talking about impulse can resolve or manage it.¹⁰
2. **Set Clear Boundaries:** Make it clear from the beginning that BP is focused on personal work, not on forming romantic relationships.
3. **Post-Group Boundaries:** After the group ends, participants should avoid any contact that could lead to romantic relationships. Romantic feelings that firstly arise in the group setting are driven by openness and the group's safe environment and not by individual initiative. Past experiences have shown that relationships starting in the group often don't work out well outside it.¹²
4. **Couples in the Group:** If there are couples already in the group, their existing relationship might affect how they engage with personal issues and group activities.
5. **Professional Ethics:** Group leaders must adhere to professional ethics, which means avoiding any actions that could lead to sexual relationships with participants.

As a personal note, I recall an activity at the Castel Gandolfo swimming pool, organized by Martien Kooyman, where participants wore briefs. This illustrates that the issue is not about attire.

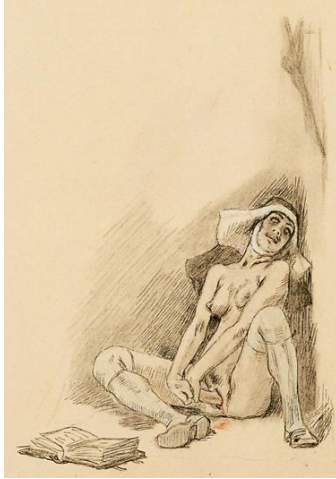
e.g. The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa

I will now present three images showing how sexual embodiment has been perceived historically.¹³

Gian Lorenzo Bernini (+1680), Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.



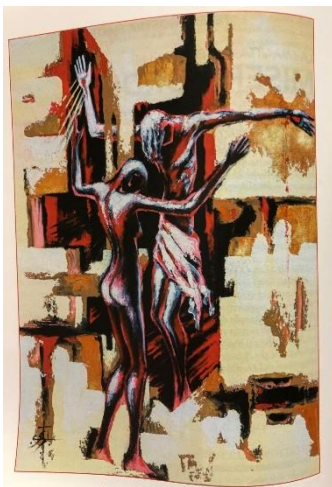
A powerful example of how Teresa de Avila's mystical experiences were portrayed in art.



Félicien Rops (+1898)

From the last decade of the 19th century, it depicts the Ecstasy of St. Theresa as a masturbatory act, in which the saint is depicted masturbating with a dildo.

Another artistic representation/interpretation of Teresa's experiences.



“Il Carmelo oggi” magazine, (39) 2024, n.4 June, pg. 10.

A recent image from the June 2024 issue that visually interprets Teresa's phrase "hurling myself to Christ greatly wounded," highlighting the deep and passionate nature of her experiences.

These examples help us understand how historical and artistic interpretations of sensuality and spirituality can provide insight into our own experiences.

Conclusions

In the Bonding Psychotherapy process, due to the type of therapy, sensitivity and its various expressions are strongly called upon. It may conceal judgements and prejudices, which start far back in one's personal history, or may come from one's environment (types of behaviour on an epigenetic basis or moral upbringing, whether secular or religious, including taboos). All this has to be related to a path of awareness and free choices for the client, but first of all for the therapist, animator and guide of the group.

Talking about it in the group is always important and fruitful, because beyond mental judgements, there can be a lot of guilt for what happened (suffered or caused) in life. Many aspects of adaptation (see our acceptor/rejector) are rooted in individual and social experiences, linked to the perceptions and sensitivities that are ingrained.

From my experience of many groups, I can say that sexuality, in itself considered, falls within the simplest theme in its objective reality, but it gets damned complicated when one enters into sensual learning and living, that is, in interpersonal relations and in its modalities of expression, request and offer.

Notes

(1) D. Lepera, Mail of 28.03.2024 addressed to the SIdiBP Assembly, "in order to discuss affectivity and sexuality in the BP".

(2) J. Zimmermann, Taboos in Bonding Pshychotherapy, International Conference ISBP, Lisbon 2018.

(3) The word "clinical" is funny. It means to bend down and place oneself on one's knees next to the person who has fallen, to care for the injured or sick person. So those who aspire to become the "world's greatest clinician" can hope to realise their dream the more they can kneel to the sick person who is suffering. We in BP have chosen to embrace standing or lying on the mattress on top of each other.

(4) Devoto-Oli, Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana, Milan 2010 (for the common meaning of the words used (online updated edition)).

(5) The diagram seems very complex, but in reality things are simpler and the dynamics start and reveal themselves in three directions, which are never absolute but intertwined:

- I feel and deny what I feel in myself and in the other
- I feel in me, I take and use for myself what I feel in the other
- I feel in me, I share and exchange what I feel in the other from me and in me

The me/itself can be felt - it often happens - as other than me! It is all part of the dynamics of perceptions and sensations, because I can deal with the body that I am and the body that is other than me. In my experience in groups and interviews, the kind of relationship to sensations emerges from these simple and clear questions, but which are not simple:

- do you accept or deny what you feel in yourself and others?
- how much does what you feel bother or disturb you?
- listen to what you feel, what emotions come up?
- what feelings lead you to do and say to yourself and others?
- do you stay in the feelings that involve you?

The resulting dynamics could be more or less strong and energetic, such as defence or attack, flight or taking charge, use/abuse or total renunciation, confusion and dispersion or obsessiveness and dependence.

Sensitivity in general influences and affects interpersonal and social relations a great deal, not to mention couple life and therefore the evolution of the erotic, amicable, agapic relationship.

(6) Veni Creator, is the Vespers hymn of the Solemnity of Pentecost, celebrated by the Christian world 50 days after Easter.

(7) Inevitable reference F. de Waal, The Politics of Chimpanzees. Power and Sex among the Apes, Roma-Bari 1984; Idem, La scimmia che siamo. The past and future of human nature, Milan 2006. I caught in particular the mutual care of 'grooming', cuddling and playing intimacy, a true exercise of sensuality given to other members of the community. A normal rule of living bodies, which today is in danger of closing in on the destructive individualism hypothesised by Y.N. Harari, Sapiens, from animals to gods, Florence 2023, who writes on page 516, final lines: "Humans seem more irresponsible than ever. We are self-made gods, we have only the laws of physics to keep us company, and we are accountable to no one. As a result, we are causing the destruction of our fellow animals and the surrounding ecosystem, seeking nothing but our own well-being and enjoyment, and justifiably without ever being satisfied. Can there be anything more dangerous than a mass of unsatisfied and irresponsible gods who do not even know what they want?" Significant individual liberation data on the collapse of the family p.442 ff.

(8) Original case history of pure sensorality about pressure:

- Slipping: horrible feeling, from feeding onwards, if baby is not held tightly.

- **Throwing the baby in the air:** if not caught in the fall, generates mistrust/insecurity.
- **Hand-holding:** in every accompaniment, if the grip is slippery it generates mistrust.
- **Hold in danger or fear:** if it is not felt as strong or is not there... I let go.
- **Embrace:** even of love, if it does not have a certain consistency it does not express itself.
- **Safety harness:** if it is not felt tight and tight it does not give security.
- **Swing/swing:** when butt, hips and hands are not felt tight, I stop!
- **After trauma/risk of death:** the tight hug can act as a container for the whole body.
- **In pain/suffering:** holding hands tightly, especially by the sufferer.
- **Aqony and dying:** holding the hand is a sign of presence, comfort, solidarity.

As one feels inside and sees outside, sensoriality has the power to direct itself to the outside and to the other, as an element of contact with the real. It goes, and comes indirectly, a sense of belonging to the existential moment one is living, without having an advantage/disadvantage, as sensuality does for pleasure.

(9) I had some doubts about the concept and distinct use of sensoriality and sensuality. An article entitled Sensory Pollination, which appeared in Style Magazine (Corsera, no.3, March 2024), dispelled it for me in favour of the distinction. At first glance I was surprised, because of the term "pollination", then I was astonished to read Michele Chiavarella's piece, which deals with the subject in relation to clothes but also to technology. This produces objects, both 3D and laser, that aim to "attract the senses". The entire piece fully confirmed, in words and images, my idea and perception of "sensoriality", as the logical and concrete function of the senses to make contact with the world, without which the human person does not live. Also because every person belongs - existentially - to the world itself.

(10) U. Berghello, La crisi dell'amore - prevenire e curare i disagi familiari, Città di Castello 2009. The author summarises more than 40 years of studies in this volume and shows the correct and incorrect passages in the experience of sensuality and sexuality, also explaining how the bodily relationship passes and transforms in history, without forgetting occult practices. See also T. Mezzetti, "...come leone ruggente", Turin 2011 (pp.113-142 on sexual magic); Ernst Ell, Educazione al matrimonio, Chieti 1971 (for a historical comparison); Claudio Risé, Il padre, l'assente inaccettabile, Alba 2007;

(11) G. Stadtmüller, La personalità umana - I suoi stadi evolutivi, le sue crisi, Silea (TV) 2024, pg.19-20, deals with the difference between sensuality and sexuality, where among other things he brings out the "sense of pressure" as a sign of contact and belonging (to squeeze, unite, press, envelop, stay, penetrate. graze). It is the proper and specific sense of sensoriality, that of making the pleasure/displeasure of the 'encounter with any other than oneself' important, thus realising a new experience, which opens up to all kinds of evolutionary perception in choices and decisions. Here is an example simple enough to appear banal, I use it because the child's voice says: "I want this candy not the other one, because I don't like that one". The enjoyment of that taste gives value to the child, but also to the candy, the one that is chosen (incentivising its commercial production). It gratifies both poles, in other words, allowing choices and decisions, on experience. This orients one to feel/think what is right/wrong, good/bad, etc., providing intentions for next actions. The actors in love scenes are also in the situation of experiencing arousal and sensual and sexual stimulation. When the partner says: "it happens to me, I apologise and I am sorry, but it happens with you, you are valued and you can like it", in reality he is describing sensual sensitivity, not sensual attraction per se aimed at sexual action.

(12) G. Stadtmueller, Idem, p.101-2: "Entering sexuality one goes into exclusivity with another person and with a strong tendency to exclude oneself from the group process. ... Attachment to other people in the bonding experience can create difficulties in client relationships".

(13) Three photos about how sensitivities cross and lose boundaries of right and wrong, but reveal the position of the observer and the artist in relation to a 'certain feeling' of things in the

sexual sphere. Bernini's ecstasy, Teresa with the dildo, Teresa in front of the crucifix (two nudities compared, Christ and Teresa with a spiritual value). I believe that these are the most immediate and strongest images to understand the interpretative and life distances.

References

AA.VV., *Le perdite e risorse della famiglia*, Milan 2007.

Andolfi, M. & D'Elia, A. (2007). *Le perdite e risorse della famiglia*. Raffaello Cortina Editore.

Berghello, U. (2009). *La crisi dell'amore. Prevenire e curare i disagi familiari*. Edizioni Ares.

Casriel, D. (1972). *A scream away from happiness*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

Corriere della sera (2024). *Impollinazione sensoriale*, appeared in *Style Magazine* (Corsera, n.3, March 2024);

Crea, G. (2014). *Psicologia, spiritualità e benessere vocazionale*. Edizioni Messaggero Padova, pg.115-138

Devoto, G. & Oli, G., C. (2010). *Devoto-Oli, Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*. Milano. (updated on-line edition).

De Waal, F. (1984). *The politics of chimpanzees. Power and sex among the apes*, Rome-Bari 1984;

De Waal, F. (2006). *The ape we are. The past and future of human nature*, Milan 2006;

Ell, E. (1971). *Educazione al matrimonio*. Paoline.

Harari, Y., N. (2017). *Sapiens. Da animali a dèi. Breve storia dell'umanità*. Bompiani, pg. 442 and following.

Kooyman, M., Olij, R. J. B., & Storm, R. A. (2014). *Bonding psychotherapy: An effective group psychotherapy method to improve dysfunctional attachment styles*. *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 18, 43-56.

Mezzetti, T. (2011). "...come leone ruggente...". *Elledici*, pg.113-142.

Risé, C. (2007). *Il padre, l'assente inaccettabile*. Edizioni san Paolo.

Stadtmüller, G. (2024). *La personalità umana – I suoi stadi evolutivi, le sue crisi*, Silea (TV) 2024.

Stauss, K., & Ellis, F. W. (2007). *Bonding psychotherapy: theoretical foundations and methods*. *International Society for Bonding Psychotherapy*.

Zimmermann, J. (2018). *Taboos in Bonding Pshychotherapy*, International Conference ISBP, Lisbona 2018;