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The Skin as a Glass of Mind Postmodern Character Orientation and Skin Disease

Armin Bader

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(“The Skin as a Glass of Mind” is a German Saying: Die Haut als Spiegel der Seele)

In the lifetime of Erich Fromm the theory, that non-productive orientation can cause substantial disease, was a very daring assertion and not figured by many psychologists and scientists. But times are changing – today we find a new discipline, bearing down the old-fashioned paradigm of a biological understanding of health and favouring a new holistic paradigm of health as a biopsychosocial thing: *psychoneuroimmunology*.

Far off to reduce psychological and mental processes to biochemical cases, psychoneuroimmunology was able to prove that mind and emotion do activate complex neuroimmunological and neurobiological processes who – given the specific genetic imprinting - can cause physical disease (keywords: pituitary-hypothalamus complex (PHC), catecholamines, cortisol, Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)). Actually, we can scientifically prove, what psychoanalysis and psychotherapy understand since almost a century: sometimes skin is a glass of mind or, in other words: sometimes a skin disease is an unknown protest against postmodern character orientation and the need for psychological well-being expresses itself in substantial disease.

Following *clinical case study* substantiates the above mentioned considerations: A very successful female lawyer at the age of 45 was

repeatedly admitted to our department of dermatology and allergology because her chronically generalized psoriasis could not be cured by standardized outpatient treatment techniques, the patient had to undergo painful therapies like photophoresis and chemotherapy. Mrs. H. showed an authentic and impressive personality and made a great visual impact, she impressed physicians and patients as well. She seemed to manage her life in a perfect manner. She is the head of a lawyer’s office and member of the local high-society - and she is mother of two children (3 and 5 years old). She is a single parent after breaking up with her husband one year before starting psychotherapy.

Addressing this breaking up she said: „*When I married, my husband was a successful businessman but due to economic changes in the Ruhr region he had to file for bankruptcy. By and by everything went wrong. Not that we had financial problems, but my husband was present at home every day, he became depressive and started to drink at times. There was no dealing any more with him. But I am a happy person and I wanted to keep at this, so finally I separated one year ago. That was a good decision, actually I can live my life as I want to live it. My profession and the children, this is not a problem to me, I can cope with this, notably I have good friends and a cleaning lady.*”



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In her case history we found out that Mrs. H.'s acute attacks of psoriasis shortly emerged after the separation from her husband. Besides some small eczema while hitting puberty she did not report about skin diseases except the severe attacks after separation.

(In many of her behaviour patterns Mrs. H. actually reminds me of the postmodern „I-am-me-orientation“ that Rainer Funk illustrated in his book *Ich und Wir*: her expressive emotions, her authenticity and honesty, her totally being in the here-and-now, her social skills and her need, to get in contact with as many people as possible, but simply in high-society lifestyles and willing to break the contact immediately, if the counterpart is failing the „fun-factor“.)

In the course of a two-year multimodale psychotherapy (analytical speech therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy) Mrs. H. recognized, that she still was afflicted with feelings of guilty and shame because of breaking up with her husband. In one of the following sessions she began to cry talking about strong feelings of carefulness towards her husband. One day she broke in on the therapist by saying that she had established contact with her former husband. It is of importance that the sessions of photophoresis began to decrease in these days due to the decreasing of her acute attacks of psoriasis (in 2004 Mrs. H. did not need to undergo photo-

phoresis treatment any more, she only had to show up as a matter of routine monitoring in our outpatient clinic.)

In the last psychotherapeutic session Mrs. H. seemed to be notably changed: she behaved not exited, less expressive, somewhat modest, reporting, that she is sometimes adopting and defending social cases in her lawyer's office (what she definitely dismissed by then) und that she established good contact with her former husband: *„Actually I do believe, I got this skin disease, because I didn't work up with the situation and the separation, yes, somehow I was not grown-up, in spite of the children; now I feel more being myself and I am able to accept my skin as a good friend telling me when I'm wrong.“*

Only excellent scientific and medical monitoring (for instance: a haemogram on catecholamines, fMRT, etc.) could have proved clearly the causal link between remission of psoriasis and the change in mind and behaviour of Mrs. H. towards a more productive orientation and mental health. But even without hard-core scientific data this case study supports the idea of the skin as a glass of mind and soul: sometimes a promoter for stunted biophilia, a wake-up call for our human resources and against non-productive character orientation

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