

embodied activism

"Joining Rae's invitation to embodied activism offers me a wide and pragmatic hope."

—STACI K. HAINES, PHD,
author of *The Politics of Trauma* and
cofounder of generative somatics

**engaging
the body
to cultivate
liberation, justice,
and authentic
connection**

A
PRACTICAL
GUIDE FOR
TRANSFORMATIVE
SOCIAL
CHANGE

FOREWORD BY BAYO AKOMOLAFE, PHD

**rae
johnson,
phd**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17432979.2024.2306908?src=>

Embodied Activism: *Engaging the body to cultivate liberation, justice, and authentic connection*, by Rae Johnson, North Atlantic Books, 2023, 240pp, £10.99 (paperback), ISBN-9781623176990.

The Humanistic psychology movement has an embedded and implicit connection between radical politics and personal change – an assumption at least in this branch of psychotherapy is that ‘the personal is political’. However, because of the lack of explicit political connection in the theory and teaching of psychotherapy there is a tendency to assume a left leaning approach which sees personal liberation as collective, often without this being spelt out and linked to theory. This book provides that linking by blending concepts of somatic psychology with current social and political dialogues and debates. It draws together and updates the many social, spiritual and political strands of thinking developed over the last 4 or 5 decades of my own lived experience.

‘The central premise of *Embodied Activism* is that our everyday embodied relationships are the foundational building blocks for systemic change’ (Chapter 6) and that ‘the lived felt experience of the body in the world is never politically neutral’ (p.105).

Whilst much of the movement of 80’s grassroots politics advanced feminism in action by raising awareness of hierarchies and creating cooperative group structures and processes, the ‘activist stereotype’ was nevertheless outwardly directed - ‘taking action against’ - even whilst it could be colourful, exuberant and fun. In the opening chapter reframing what it means to be an activist engaged with social change, *Embodied Activism* suggests a more internal frame of reference which focuses on interpersonal dynamics and individual action in what is referred to as ‘*microactivism*’ (p.8). One can be a researcher or an artist – ‘the action is now focused on the intimate injustices playing out in the context of the present moment between people who are directly, mutually, and concretely affected by them’. Activism then, is something anyone can and must engage with in their sphere of influence and their everyday life by bringing somatic consciousness to bear. The book draws together many voices from within the somatic psychotherapy lexicon and applies them to address the social and political challenges we face today.

Structured as a handbook, it explicitly focuses on what it *feels* like to use our bodies as reference points in dialogues outside the protection of the therapy room, promoting conversations which might otherwise remain implicit, and carry with them all the old patterns of dominance and submission.

Each chapter offers reflective exercises and tools, suggesting steps we can take to reconsider personal power and social position at the same time as expanding our inner awareness of our somatic responses. It considers broadening our ‘window of tolerance’ to include a ‘somatic bandwidth’ – in other words increasing our range of responses to the outer by cultivating and expanding our inner library of somatic responses, and learning how to access them in the moment we need to draw on them – under pressure and in potentially re-traumatising situations.

The author suggests this responsiveness to our inner life can be effective in inner and outer change by being both reparative and enlivening. Trauma is recognised as a result of ongoing

oppression and marginalisation as much as resulting from any single life event, and a 'somatic first aid kit' is offered at the end of Chapter 2, providing strategies for self-regulation.

Chapter 3 *Coming to Our Senses* presents the concept of embodiment rooted in phenomenology, and the roots of our disembodiment historically, socially and culturally are explained. Whilst this background will be familiar to many therapists trained in these perspectives, I appreciated the discussion extending to the 'politics of embodiment' outlining the ways in which binaries are applied to embodied characteristics, leading to people being assigned a social category. At the same time, and indeed because of this, it is suggested that reclaiming bodily awareness can offer a radical shift in how we go about engaging in social transformation. The subject of oppression is the doorway to the transformation. This chapter offers various exercises to engage our *interoception* (sensing our internal sensory world) *exteroception* (sensing the external world) and experimenting with *proprioception* through movement connecting to our environment.

Chapter 4 *Rewriting Body Language* offers readers a rich immersion in body language praxis, suggesting exercises that tune in to body movements, bringing awareness to how we each use physical boundaries and space, eye contact and nonverbal communication. Whilst these themes are always under discussion in body psychotherapy trainings, this exploration incorporates the social and political by giving specific attention to themes of social power and control - how we adapt or alter our ways of communicating nonverbally in order to 'fit in' or concede to subtly imposed power differences. A self-reflective question is posed – "How do we move in a way that feels right and true to us, given the embeddedness of our body in social-cultural and political contexts?" Some of the aspects of embodiment discussed may be less familiar in terms of their social implications and conditioning whilst others are well recognised.

Chapter 5 *Re-shaping Body Image* discusses body norms and asks how members of socially subordinated groups reclaim some authority over their body image in the process of liberation and empowerment? Body image is a theme familiar to us all, causing much distress in terms of identity especially for young people. Whilst in some cultures body conformity is a mechanism of social control, in the West images are fed to us constantly in every area of our lives and widely discussed on public platforms. They are a basic cog in the wheel of capitalist culture - the shape of a body is marketable and indicates social status more than any other aspect of our embodied selves. As discussed by the author, liberating the body inevitably means going against social norms and demands to look a certain way, but they further warn against the imposition of new countercultural norms which can be as limiting as those imposed by the mainstream.

'Queer theory asks us to question how these norms came to exist and by whose authority they are enforced; it requires us to ponder how our bodies are shaped by the expectations of others, and it urges us to consider the relational implications of bodily conformity and nonconformity'. (p.94).

This chapter introduces creative exercises which invite the imagination through somatic enquiry. This area of discussion could easily become adversarial, pushing against the norms

of the dominant culture, but instead it is open and inviting, demonstrating the delicate and gentle nature of experiential somatic enquiry.

The final chapter *Bringing It All Home* draws together further suggestions for embodied engagement in relationships where there are inequalities and differences, and offers suggestions for how to nurture an '*intercorporeal ethos*' (Merleau-Ponty). I was especially interested in the 'focusing together' transcript from three students who decide to explore 'relational focusing' with each other to help them listen to each other's embodied experience. They articulate the experience well....

"Being able to slow down and go to this deep, empathetic listening where we are in differently identifying bodies.....but also returning to something that's primordial, before colonization, just bodies together, plugged into this deep intimacy. Empathy is forged through proximity, so that the closer we get to people through our entire beings, the more we gain a deeper understanding" (p.124).

I loved this creative and innovative use of the focusing technique and believe it will inspire future students to explore it as a method for more embodied conversation.

Readers may be challenged at times by the use of language in the book – terminology which may be new such as *percepticide...intercorporeality....microactivism ...microsociology*. Texts which include unusual terms and specialised language can be experienced as alienating. However the author is careful to explain and reference these, and arguably they are attempting to describe something emergent which calls for new terminology.

Professional imperatives to include updates on diversity, equality and intersectionality as part of the education and practice of therapists today might appear as 'bolt-on's if they do not arise out of an inner knowing and 'felt sense' of the challenges that we and our colleagues and clients are facing. In my view they cannot and must not become 'top down' educational goals to add to a portfolio of professional development – rather they must become embodied inner knowings. Inclusivity requires expansion of more than mere language – it demands a willingness to deepen our experiential understanding.

This is a handbook that requires the reader to process, differentiate and assess and reassess their experience of embodiment in the light of queer theory. Whilst for me there were many familiar themes in relation to inhabiting my body as a known experience and part of my identity through almost 40 years of involvement with body psychotherapy, there was much that was new and embracing of contemporary themes. I enjoyed the book's structure and creative approach - the weaving of theory with socially significant themes, combined with the invitation to process through the many experiential exercises and body stories. This made for an embodied conversation with the author rather than a presentation of information. To my knowledge the only comparable book in the field of body psychotherapy which has updated and contextualised themes of diversity and intersectionality is Ogden (2021).

Finally a fulsome list of resources is provided at the back of the book – community, therapy, education and training as well as a further reading list, followed by notes to each chapter. It is a book that is intended for use, not just reference. Rae Johnson is to be thanked for all they have given in this handbook. I will certainly use it in my body psychotherapy teaching.

References

Pat Ogden. P. (2021) *The Pocket Guide to Sensorimotor Psychotherapy*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Tree Staunton is a UKCP Honorary Fellow, and an Emeritus member of Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling (BCPC). She has been a Registered Body Psychotherapist, Supervisor and Trainer during the last 30 years. She was Director of BCPC from 2011–2023 and continues to teach and supervise trainee psychotherapists. She is a long-standing member of Climate Psychology Alliance, UK. Publications include *Body Psychotherapy* (ed, Routledge, 2002) editor of the journal of UK Association for Psychotherapy Integration; contributor in *The Change Process in Psychotherapy During Troubling Times* (ed Sue Wright, Routledge 2022) and co-editor of *Being a Therapist in a Time of Climate Breakdown* (eds Anderson, Staunton, O’Gorman and Hickman, Routledge) to be released March 2024.

treestaunton.bcpc@gmail.com