

Grasping and Transforming the Embodied Experience of Oppression

Rae Johnson, PhD, RSW, RSMT
Pacifica Graduate Institute

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Abstract

Research has established the crucial role of the body in navigating experiences of social difference and mediating the traumatic impact of oppression. Although conceptual frameworks from education, counseling, and critical embodiment studies offer powerful lenses through which to view these experiences of oppression, existing social justice models (e.g., anti-oppressive education, multicultural counseling and social work) are insufficiently inclusive of the body's role in navigating oppressive social interactions. Conversely, existing models of working with embodied experience (e.g. somatic education and somatic counseling/psychotherapy) are insufficiently attentive to the role of social power in interpersonal relations. Drawing on current research on the embodied experience of oppression, this paper articulates an integrative model for addressing problematic experiences in relation to the body and social justice.

Keywords: embodiment, oppression, social justice, diversity, anti-oppressive education, multicultural counseling, experiential learning

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This paper introduces an interdisciplinary approach to diversity and anti-oppression work grounded in research and designed for use by social workers, counselors, educators, and other human service professionals. Comprising a conceptual framework and a model of practice, this approach integrates key findings from education, psychology, and embodiment studies while addressing critical gaps in how these fields have understood and responded to issues of social justice. The approach has evolved from my work as a somatic psychotherapist and movement educator, and been informed by the research colleagues and I have conducted into the embodied experience of oppression (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Caldwell, 2010).

The ideas that form the basis of the approach have existed for many years, as have the practices these ideas have generated. They reach back at least as far as the early American educator John Dewey and the somatic practice developed by his friend and colleague, F.M. Alexander, around the turn of the last century. They span continents and cultures, from the work of Brazilian educational activist Paulo Freire to the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty. They straddle intellectual traditions from pragmatism to postmodernism, and practices as diverse as consciousness raising circles and dance improvisation. In developing this approach, I am indebted to the excellence of these ideas and the refinements of practice carefully crafted by so many dedicated practitioners.

While the ideas and practices that serve as the foundation of this approach are not new, their integration is novel. By bringing together a number of different theoretical and practical models, it becomes possible to identify some of the missing pieces that have prevented these approaches from responding as effectively as they might to what is arguably our most pressing and deeply entrenched social issue – the systematic and mostly unconscious oppression we inflict on one another in our simplest everyday interactions. For human services professionals whose intentions are to help rather than harm, it is essential that the embodied dimensions of privilege, discrimination, and marginalization are brought to the surface of our awareness and that we become more skilled at navigating them honestly, respectfully, and with grace.

The approach described in this paper for grasping and transforming the embodied experience of oppression takes as its starting point the assumption that oppression is a social construction; a “system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another” (Johnson, 2001, p. 20) and that the behaviors we use to enact oppression are mostly learned rather than innate (Freire, 2000). By extension, it should be possible to “unlearn” these relational strategies in order to transform our individual and collective experience of oppression. This micro-sociological perspective does not negate the significance of institutionalized oppression or legislated inequities; rather, it focuses on a mechanism for reproducing oppression that often persists beyond the hard-won changes to laws and social structures, in part because of the relative lack of attention it is given (Weiss, 1999). This inattention colludes with a widespread dismissal of the body as an important source of social knowledge and effectively maintains our everyday embodied interactions as a primary locus for implicit social control.

John Dewey’s educational philosophy and David Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning serve as a foundation for the model articulated in this paper, while the work of critical educational theorists and multicultural counseling theorists fleshes out a necessary counter-hegemonic perspective. The model also integrates key contributions from somatics, critical embodiment theory, nonverbal communication, and traumatology. This integration of critical analysis and embodied perspectives with an experiential learning model allows the inherent “grasping and transforming¹” functions of Kolb’s widely used and recognized cycle of experiential learning to be applied to a particular kind of experience (oppression) whose embodied dimensions are key to its deconstruction.

This article is structured in two parts: the first articulates a conceptual framework based on the strategic integration of the literature referenced above. The second part of the paper describes the model of practice based on the conceptual framework, and offers examples and suggestions for implementation.

Conceptual Framework

Learning and Unlearning Oppression

Educational theorist John Dewey (1897, 1916) believed that the best learning was grounded in experience, relevant to the issues of learners’ lives in the context of their own communities, and fostered their capacity to contribute to society in a free and productive way. Dewey’s ideas inform the field of constructionist education, which views learning as a process in which learners actively

¹ In Kolb’s cycle, “grasping” refers to ways of understanding experience by feeling and thinking, and “transforming” to reflecting on and experimenting with new options in order to shift or change that experience in some meaningful, intentional way (Kolb, 1984).

construct knowledge from their own experiences. The concepts and principles constructed from these experiences are then applied to the real-world context of the learner, resulting in knowledge that is necessarily mediated by the context of the learning, the social environment, and the prior knowledge of the learner.

Scholars in experiential learning (Boud, 1985; Kolb, 1984) assert that we learn about the world and ourselves in an interactive, ongoing action/reflection cycle. As we encounter new information and experiences, these interactions with the world change our view of ourselves and our relationships to others. From an experiential perspective, learning is a complex, holistic activity that is deeply informed by who learners are, what they already know and believe, and how their life experiences have influenced and affected them.

For many, the life experience of being oppressed and oppressive creates deep and lasting imprints of how to treat (and expect to be treated by) people different from us, and how to negotiate power differentials among groups and individuals. It shapes our identities and our worldviews, and informs our everyday interactions. Working through complex and sometimes subtle intersections of privilege and discrimination, oppression is a life lesson. Given that one of the most important things we learn in hierarchical societies centers on the use (and misuse) of interpersonal and social power, it seems necessary that the educational strategies designed to help us learn from experience address this particular issue.

Encompassing a variety of educational approaches (including feminist, critical, multicultural, queer, postcolonial, and other social justice approaches), anti-oppressive education can be broadly understood as any educational approach that aims to challenge multiple forms of oppression (Kumashiro, 2000). Anti-oppressive educators argue that learning is fundamental to overcoming circumstances of entrenched social oppression (Freire, 2000; hooks, 2014), and that education is never politically neutral.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) is foundational to understanding an anti-oppressive education perspective. Like Dewey, Freire believed that we create social and cultural realities (rather than viewing them as pre-existing and immutable structures) and that those social realities in turn create us as inherently social beings. Social transformation is therefore our responsibility, through reflection and action. In order to create culture differently, Freire argued that we must understand the systems and mechanisms that perpetuate the status quo. He also insisted that no matter how submerged we are in the culture of silence and invisibility that surrounds oppression, we are all capable of a critical consciousness of social reality. That is, we can all learn the ability to identify and evaluate the aspects of our experience in which we feel manipulated, coerced, or ignored due to our membership in a social group.

While Freire's analysis of oppression focuses largely on social class, educational theorist bell hooks (2014) draws significantly on Freire in developing an anti-oppressive pedagogy relevant to multicultural contexts. As one of the first feminist theorists to write convincingly about the intersecting dimensions of sexism and racism, hooks expands the concerns of anti-oppressive teaching and learning to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. Anti-oppressive educator Kevin Kumashiro (2000) further develops critical pedagogy by infusing a postmodern perspective informed by queer theory as well as by Buddhist philosophy. Like hooks, Kumashiro resists a prior tendency toward over-simplification and generalization when proposing strategies for addressing oppression, emphasizing the fluid, context-specific, and highly subjective nature of human experience.

These educational theorists provide a number of useful insights into how oppression is learned (and may be unlearned); 1) we learn from experience as well as through instruction, and therefore

the strategies we employ to challenge oppression must provide opportunities to explore our experiences, not just provide instruction on cultural competency, 2) changing oppressive social patterns and structures requires an understanding of how they function, 3) oppression is enacted through multiple, intersecting social identities and positions (rather than as a single “top-down” force and corresponding “bottom-up” resistance), and 4) practices designed to resist and transform oppression must continually adapt to the changing contexts and diverse needs of the people they serve. However, as valuable as these contributions are to understanding how oppression is enacted and maintained as a social construction, these perspectives consistently fail to address one of the most significant and enduring strategies for perpetuating inequitable social relations: the everyday embodied interactions we have with each other.

Oppression Embodied

Scholars in nonverbal communication have long recognized the significance of our bodily comportment² and argue that nonverbal behavior affects our relationships and interpersonal environments in intricate ways, providing insight into emotional states and influencing perceptions of competence, sincerity, authority, and vulnerability (Manusov & Patterson, 2006). In fact, some researchers argue that the nonverbal component of social interaction (rather than institutional structure) is the locus for the most common means of social control (Freeman & Henley, 1995). Despite its importance in human interaction, Ekman and Friesen (1969, p. 181) note:

[Most people] do not know what they are doing with their bodies when they are talking, and no one tells them. People learn to disregard internal cues that are informative about their stream of body movements and facial expressions. Most interactive nonverbal behavior seems to be enacted with little conscious choice or registration; efforts to inhibit what is shown fail because the information about what is occurring is not customarily within awareness.

Nonverbal communication researchers have shed light on this largely unconscious element of interpersonal interaction and helped us to better understand the nonverbal communication differences across a range of social categories and cultural groups. One of the most significant findings of this research is the conclusion that asymmetrical interactions are a hallmark of the nonverbal exchanges between individuals from dominant/subordinate social groups.

This nonverbal asymmetry between individuals with differing social status can take the form of an unequal access to certain behaviors related to informality and intimacy (Freeman & Henley, 1995). In these cases, the individual with more power is usually acknowledged (by both parties) to have the right to exercise certain familiarities which the subordinate is not permitted to initiate or reciprocate. For example, in conversation with an employee, a man may lean back in his chair in a relatively casual and relaxed posture, while his female employee is expected to maintain a more formal demeanor. That same supervisor may touch his employee casually on the arm in the course of making a conversational point, but the employee does not have the same license to initiate touch with her supervisor. This initiation or increase of intimacy and informality is the right of the individual with higher status or power, and this prerogative affords them more control of the relationship.

² According to Marcel Danesi, (1999), human beings have the capacity to produce nearly three-quarters of a million distinct physical signs, including different bodily postures, hand gestures, and facial expressions. Conservative estimates suggest that the nonverbal component of human communication accounts for nearly 70% of a message’s meaning (Birdwhistell, 1970) and up to 90% of its emotional content (Fromkin and Rodman, 1983; Mehrabian 1968, 1981).

The use of personal and interpersonal space provides another example of asymmetrical nonverbal interaction. Early studies in nonverbal communication (Sommer, 1969) showed that dominant animals and high-status human beings are afforded greater personal space, and those with lower status tend to yield space to those with higher status. Similar findings of asymmetrical interaction are found in the use of eye contact, control over time, and other categories of nonverbal behavior. In those situations in which one social group is regarded as inferior to another, members of that group will generally be more gesturally submissive, more readable (nonverbally expressive), more sensitive (accurate in decoding another's nonverbal expressions), and more accommodating (adapting to another's nonverbal behaviors) (Henley and LaFrance, 1995).

Although these asymmetries are often subtle, their impact over time is considerable. According to Henley (1977), members of socially subordinated groups are constantly reminded of their inferior social status through the nonverbal messages they receive from others. They are also required to affirm that status in their response to those messages, as well as in the messages they themselves transmit. Freeman & Henley (1995) argue that the repetitive and insidious nature of these exercises in dominance and submission quickly slip below the level of awareness, effectively internalizing social conventions to the point where they may no longer even be recognized as oppressive.

Not surprisingly, these asymmetries find their way into the counseling room as well as the classroom, and preliminary attempts to extend the insights of anti-oppressive nonverbal communication research have now been made in the realm of multicultural counseling theory and practice. Informed by Sue's (2010) multicultural counseling theory and the notion of oppressive interpersonal interactions as "micro-aggressions", Rivera (2010) found that the nonverbal behavior of the therapist and the client's resulting somatic response contributed to experiences of cultural mis-attunement in the therapeutic setting.

Given the compelling evidence from the literature on nonverbal communication, part of the task of learning from the experience of oppression must involve becoming more attuned to the nonverbal components of our everyday interactions with others – to how we read (and are being read by) others on a body level. However, it is important to recognize that these interactions are highly complex, fluid, and contextualized, and they are not just external actions we perform, like clothes we put on or tools we use. These embodied interactions are learned implicitly from our earliest social encounters onwards, and are deeply entwined with our sense of personal identity. In fact, a number of embodiment theorists (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Weiss, Hanna, 1970) have argued that these interactions are nothing less than the process whereby we become who we are.

This perspective is echoed in the embodied, existential form of phenomenology put forward by Maurice Merleau Ponty (1945) and elaborated by Thomas Hanna (1987-88) which argues that we do more than simply perceive reality through our bodily senses; reality is constructed by the way in which we perceive it (Greene, 1997). This "somatic" point of view understands that our perceptions of the external environment affect our perceptions of the inner one. Shifts in physical musculature create adjustments in our emotional state. Changes in sensory phenomena inform changes in cognitive perceptions that, in turn, affect our relationship to the environment.

Although somatic theories recognize the integrality of the environment with the soma, somatic practitioners have not taken up socio-political issues specifically, with a few exceptions. Hanna's seminal work on somatics, *Bodies in Revolt* (1970), clearly articulates his argument that the need for a return to the lived experience of the body is related to the evolution of the human species, in response to industrialization, rationalization, and the commodification of the body. Other somatic theorists suggest that the legacy of oppression is perhaps most strongly felt in our bodies, and the massive global incidence of war, politically directed torture, famine, rape, and domestic

violence in this century indicates a “...criminal disregard for the muscle fibers, fluids, and neural networks in which we live” (Johnson, 1995, p.ix). In that respect, somatics can be seen as a strategy for reclaiming our bodies for ourselves, and understanding this process as both a personal and political act (Haines, 2014).

By infusing this somatic perspective with the clearly articulated categories and specific research findings of nonverbal communication, it becomes possible to differentiate the particular aspects of bodily experiences of oppression that may initially reside within us only as a vague unease, numbness, or constriction. Simultaneously, the somatic recognition of embodied engagement with others as constitutive of our very (and varied) identities suggests that the strategies implied by the nonverbal communication research (i.e., “take up more space”, “use direct eye contact”) should not be applied in a generalized, mechanistic, or superficial way. Rather, understanding how we perpetuate inequitable relations through our bodies allows us to make individual choices about how best to communicate our integrity and authenticity on a body level.

Oppression as Embodied Trauma

A final conceptual integration is necessary to fully flesh out the embodied approach to diversity work I am proposing in this paper. While nonverbal communication researchers point to the damaging and insidious effects of nonverbal subordination, when one understands these everyday interactions as a form of chronic trauma another important set of research findings becomes relevant. Psychological researchers and theorists have developed different understandings of how human beings are affected by traumatic experiences. Within the field of traumatology, the somatic effects of trauma have now been well documented (Jaffe & Segal, 2005; Levine, 1997; Ogden, Pain & Minton, 2006; van der Kolk, 1994).

Many theorists and researchers in the field of traumatology suggest that much of the violence and abuse resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exists within a larger context of societal oppression. For example, Burstow cites scholars working in the area of trans-generational trauma and community trauma to argue that individuals from oppressed and marginalized groups are violated in ways that have lasting psychological effects. She writes, “The point is oppressed people are routinely worn down by the insidious trauma in living day after day in a sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ableist society” (Burstow, 2003, p.1296).

Burstow describes trauma response not as a disorder, but as a reaction to a kind of wound, and argues that there is a physicality to trauma that must be recognized even when no overt bodily assault occurs. In particular, she notes that the trauma of oppression often results in some degree of alienation from the body. This conceptualization of oppression as traumatic is further supported by Scott and Stradling (1994), who reported examples of PTSD that demonstrate full symptomatology (intrusive thoughts and images, avoidance behavior, and hyper-arousal) in the absence of a single acute trauma. They suggest that enduring psychosocial stressors may result in a stress disorder, and recommend changes to formal diagnostic criteria to acknowledge the effects of prolonged duress. My own research (2009) further articulates the links between trauma, oppression, and the body, and argues for a reevaluation of the significance of oppressive nonverbal interactions as a source of chronic complex trauma.

An Integrative Framework

By integrating key ideas and findings from anti-oppressive and experiential education, nonverbal communication, somatic theory, and traumatology, a conceptual framework emerges that explains and addresses how our bodily selves are implicated in, impacted by, and constituted

through inequitable social relations. The statements that follow can be considered the pillars of this conceptual framework, and are each supported by research and theoretical testing.

- We learn oppression implicitly and relationally, through everyday experiences of social and political life.
- Our experiences shape (and are shaped by) multiple and intersecting social identities.
- Our bodies are a primary locus of these intersecting social identities.
- We learn about social systems through interpersonal nonverbal interactions.
- The nonverbal component of social interaction is one of the most powerful, ubiquitous, and insidious means of social control.
- Oppressive social relations are characterized by asymmetrical nonverbal interactions across a range of behavioral categories.
- Trauma is mediated through the body and manifests in embodied experiences of post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Oppression is traumatic.

Based on these assertions, a comprehensive and inclusive approach to diversity and anti-oppression work would be one in which oppression is understood as learned behavior, and in which the body's learning is figural. It would facilitate (un)learning that is experiential and relational, be able to work with the complexity of intersecting social identities, support somatic literacy³ and fluency in body language, and recognize the traumatic imprint of oppression on embodied experience. The model described in the second half of this paper represents my own attempt to address these multiple requirements in a format that is accessible and relevant to counselors, educators and human services professionals working across a range of professional contexts.

Cycle of Embodied Critical Transformation

This section describes a model of transformative learning that privileges the knowledge of the body (e.g. bodily sensation, body image, and nonverbal communication) in exploring issues of social power, privilege and difference. In developing it, I am significantly indebted to the work of David Kolb, whose cycle of experiential learning serves as its foundation. Building on the work of Dewey, Freire, and Piaget, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory consists of four stages:

- 1) experiencing (often called concrete experience),
- 2) reflecting (reflective observation),
- 3) thinking (abstract conceptualization), and
- 4) acting (active experimentation).

According to Kolb, these stages represent the natural process of learning from experience. This natural process can be enhanced by focusing intentionally on each phase, ensuring that no aspects are overlooked, and maximizing the learning possible from any given experience. Readers familiar with his work will see the clear outlines of his four stage cycle in my model, as well as the ways these phases have been elaborated to address issues of embodiment and diversity more specifically. A graphic representation of the model is included as Table 1.

³ Somatic literacy is a term coined by Paul Linden (1994) to describe a degree of conscious awareness of bodily sensations and actions.

This model of embodied critical transformation is further informed by research I have conducted into the embodied experience of oppression (Johnson, 2009). The findings of that study can be summarized as follows: 1) the embodied experience of oppression is multidimensional, 2) there is a relationship between the somatic effects of trauma and embodied responses to oppression (particularly with respect to constriction and arousal), 3) body language plays an important role in navigating oppressive interactions, 4) oppression affects body image, and 5) the body is an important source of knowledge and power in unlearning oppression. Each of these issues are addressed in the model as separate, as well as overlapping, components.

This section also articulates pedagogical and facilitation issues relevant to the use of this model, and includes suggestions for program planning and evaluation. As much as possible, I elaborate the model using examples from my own experience, and describe the process from my perspective as facilitator. This should not be taken as an indicator that the participant's perspective is less important, but that I write for an intended audience of professionals who will be curious about how they might apply this model to their own practice.

Embodied Critical Pedagogy and Facilitator Preparation

A hallmark of most experiential education, social work, and counseling models is the insistence that practitioners wishing to facilitate a process for someone else must prepare by thoughtfully and honestly examining our own experience with respect to the issues being addressed. In working with this model, I have found it essential to have a solid personal understanding of embodiment and oppression. This is not to suggest that as a facilitator, I must have identical experiences as my participants in order to be informed and helpful (for example, that I have personally experienced homophobic discrimination), but that I should enter the facilitation with some awareness of my own potential triggers, blind spots, expectations, assumptions, and projections. Prior training in somatics and diversity work has also been an important prerequisite, so that I have more than my own experience to reference when facilitating someone else's.

As a facilitator, I approach this work from a perspective that acknowledges issues of power and privilege. A "top-down" instructional or counseling style is incongruent with this model, and would only serve to reinforce pre-existing asymmetries in role power between facilitator and participants. Approaches to working with others that have emerged from liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, Aron and Corne, 1994), community psychology (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005) and feminist therapy (Burstow, 1992) offer facilitation strategies that are better suited to this model.

In the spirit of these counter-hegemonic approaches, I believe it is important to treat the learners as central to the process. My role is not to impart knowledge or information, but to help prepare learners to become actively engaged in understanding and working with their own experiences. As a facilitator, my focus should be on recognizing opportunities for learning as they occur within the field, creating an atmosphere conducive to honest and respectful disclosure, and supporting the critical and constructive review of an experience. I try to keep in mind that everyone learns differently, and that reactions to experiential exercises will vary across learners. Given the often-charged material being explored, I also prepare for unanticipated responses to material, and encourage multiple perspectives on a single "shared" event. I do my best to appreciate that learning and unlearning can be hard, and work to cultivate an environment where encouragement and empathy precede and support challenge and risk. I recognize my power as the facilitator, and how my body communicates my beliefs, attitudes and values to

participants. To that end, I encourage participants to question my authority within the agreed upon norms of safety and mutual respect.

Perhaps more than is usually the case for experiential learning situations, I also attend to the setting as part of my facilitation. Although concerns such as comfortable seats, natural light, and fresh air might seem like relatively insignificant details, research shows that we are more affected by our environment than we realize (Gladwell, 2007). I have found that creating a container that supports the sensory needs of the body signals to participants that their embodied experience is valued by the facilitator.

Program Planning Using the Cycle of Embodied Critical Transformation

When generating ideas for exploring embodied experiences of oppression using this model, I have found it important to base my strategies on the learning/counseling context and on learner/client characteristics, and to think through the objectives for any particular “exercise” or “intervention” to make sure they align with the stated objectives of the course or session. Since not everyone is familiar with an experiential approach, I take care to orient students/clients to one another and the learning/counseling context, and to engage in a process of informed consent before participants agree to take the risks entailed in opening up to experience. My orientation always includes a discussion of safety guidelines (such as confidentiality, non-coercion, and bracketing strategies), voluntary participation, and guidelines for the safe use of touch and movement.

Because I use this cycle primarily in the context of graduate coursework, I also orient participants by providing advance readings. I often assign Eli Clare’s *Stolen Bodies* (2001), which advocates for a return to the body in working with issues of gender and disability, and my own research paper on the embodied experience of oppression (Johnson, 2009), which outlines the conceptual framework and research findings that are the basis for the approach.

As participants arrive and the class begins, I continue the orientation and containment process through a series of strategies and actions. I will often put a relevant, inspirational quote on the projector screen for participants to read and mull over as they arrive. As we begin, I facilitate introductions that usually include an expression of participants’ hopes and fears about the course, and a body gesture that expresses how participants are feeling in their bodies in the moment. From there, I provide a brief description of the course and describe the cycle of embodied critical transformation, referencing Kolb’s experiential learning theory. The session then begins in earnest, with our first experiential exercise and use of the full cycle⁴.

Phase One: Embodied Experience of Oppression

Like Kolb’s cycle, the cycle of embodied critical learning usually starts with a concrete experience. In other words, it begins with doing something in which the individual or group is assigned a task, or “experiment”. For example, I might ask participants to locate an object in the room that symbolizes oppression to them, draw a picture of how their body feels when they are critical of it, or work with a partner to discover their own personal space boundaries. Unlike Kolb’s cycle, this phase of the cycle of embodied critical transformation focuses specifically on activities designed to elicit experiences of privilege, discrimination, or marginalization, and to include interoceptive data and nonverbal behavior.

⁴ Although the description in this paper focuses on the use of this cycle with a group in a course or workshop setting, I have also used it with clients in individual counseling, and found it easily adaptable to that setting.

Some examples of experiential exercises I have used include improvised movement in which participants notice bodily sensations as they shift from lying quietly on their own, to sitting and standing, and eventually moving around the room with others. This exercise highlights the relational nature of embodiment and gets participants more warmed up to each other without speaking. Other exercises include a variation on McIntosh's (1988) 'invisible knapsack of privilege' in which participants choose real objects to symbolize the social privileges they enjoy. Exercises on embodied boundaries, safe touch, and kinesthetic empathy highlight some elements of nonverbal communication, and an exercise on "reading" bodies helps participants explore the degree to which judgments, assumptions, and projections are based on body image. I also include experiential components designed to help participants explore how their bodies can be sites of strength, empowerment, and resistance – not just sites of distress and limitation.

These embodied experiential exercises are intended to evoke a tolerable amount of bodily sensation in relation to issues of power, privilege and difference. I usually sequence the exercises along a continuum from less to more interactive, and from less to more challenging in terms of topic. They work best when I take the time to set up the experience clearly and carefully, and then allow participants to engage with it in their own way. As much as possible, I use language that is inclusive or evocative of embodied sensation or movement. For example, "as you move toward your partner, notice the quality of your breathing." I have learned not to make the experiential exercises too long or too elaborate, and to allow time for participants to transition into (and out of) a more embodied state of consciousness. In choosing or designing experiential components, the essential criteria are that the experiences address issues of social power, and that they engage participants' bodies in some way.

Phase Two: Embodied Critical Reflection

"For individuals who experience monetary, time or bandwidth poverty, reflection is a luxury good." (Konnikova, 2014, p. SR1.)

Reflection is perhaps the most important of the experiential learning process. In it, we begin the crucial task of unpacking, deconstructing, and examining each facet of an event that may initially be experienced as a chaotic or undifferentiated mass. Reflection can be done alone, in pairs, or in groups, but most people seem to need a relatively quiet and time-spacious environment to get the most from this phase of learning. Facilitating embodied critical reflection is challenging, but asking the right questions and guiding conversations in strategic ways can help open participants to powerful and empowering insights. As the above quote suggests, the simple act of providing time to reflect on their experiences can help support individuals dealing with oppression and discrimination. We all know what it's like to operate in crisis mode, putting out one fire after the next without a moment to investigate the cause of the flames. Reflection is the first step in shifting out of crisis mode and into a more responsive and proactive stance.

While reflection in most experiential learning models is intended to be "critical", in that participants are encouraged to examine their experiences from multiple perspectives, in this model the emphasis on social critique is emphasized. The dominant or default social lens is identified, and a counter-hegemonic perspective explored. As a facilitator, I actively inquire about power and privilege, and encourage participants to question social norms and assumptions. I also ask about "dominant" culture and "home" culture norms with respect to the experience being explored. My questions are intended to illuminate all facets of an experience and evoke a tolerable amount of somatic disequilibrium. When reflection is undertaken in pairs or small groups, I attend to the

interactive/relational element of reflection, and support participants to privilege self-reflection over outside observations – in other words, to claim expertise on their own experience without disregarding the input of others.

In this model, participants are also asked to explore their experience from a somatic perspective. During reflection, they are encouraged to be curious about how they felt in their bodies during (and after) the event, to identify the nonverbal behavior that occurred, and to use their capacity for bodily sensation and imagery to illuminate their experience. In other words, this model recognizes that reflection is not simply a cognitive process, but also occurs through bodily expression (i.e. movement). This model deliberately engages this natural process of feeling and moving through an experience to extend and deepen reflection. During embodied critical reflection, participants gather an embodied “felt sense”⁵ of the experience that begins to help clarify all its possible meanings.

Phase Three: Integrated Distillation

After identifying, critically examining, and gathering together all the elements of an experience, the next step in the cycle asks participants to distill these various aspects and perspectives into a more cohesive whole. In Kolb’s model of experiential learning, this is referred to as the abstract conceptualization phase, and is characterized by an emphasis on thinking and hypothesizing. In this model, I expand the notion of concepts to include images, sounds, and gestures (not just words). In the cycle of embodied critical transformation, it is recognized that making meaning from experience is not always a rational process, and the role of the body in generating concepts and testing them for “fit” is underscored. Eugene Gendlin’s *Focusing* (1981) provides an excellent illustration of how the body can generate explicit knowing from implicit data. In it, the ‘felt shift’ described by Gendlin is a bodily change and sense of release that accompanies a new understanding of something that was previously unclear, in a process of organizing information at a higher level of integration.

For example, a participant might generate an “integrated distillation” in the form of a bodily sensation instead of a cognitive thought or concept. Perhaps an experience of feeling judged because of their non-normative gender presentation is distilled into a sensation of collapse in their ribcage. Although it might seem like this collapsing feeling is “just” a bodily sensation that accompanies the experience of feeling judged, because of the reflection and distillation process they have undergone, that sensation now symbolizes a whole set of understandings that has become anchored in their body. When I check with them to see if the sensation of ribcage collapse ‘fits’ with their experience of feeling judged around their body image, they describe a corresponding affirmation on a body level – a sense of release, relief, and settling. Once confirmed, this distilled sensation of collapse easily leads them to experiment with how they might want to shift or change that sensation (and possibly, by extension, their next experience of feeling judged around body image).

Further facilitation around this experience might include some referencing to pre-existing concepts and research findings about body image and trans* oppression. For example, I might want to help support their integrated distillation of “ribcage collapse” by offering ideas about musculoskeletal responses to chronic trauma (Scaer, 2014), or about shame and queer body image (Atkins, 1998). In this way, I help the participant stay anchored in self-generated ideas about their experience, while benefiting from the validation and elaboration of externally generated concepts.

⁵ The term ‘felt sense’ is used by Gendlin (1984) to describe the second step in Focusing.

The hallmarks of the integrated distillation phase are:

- Analysis, insight and meaning making in this phase includes somatic and social data
- The process works to help “name” nonverbal (i.e., embodied) micro-aggressions
- It generates critical concepts that are embodied as well as cognitive
- Self-generated concepts are privileged over other-generated concepts
- Concepts may take the form of embodied image, posture, or movement (not just words)
- The process results in an embodied “felt shift” in the participant

Once the experience of oppression has been meaningfully explored, participants move to the task of experimenting to change that experience in their bodies and in the world.

Phase Four: Embodied Critical Experimentation

This phase of the cycle focuses on new ways of acting in (not just thinking about) the world. Specifically, it asks participants to experiment with solutions to the problem of embodied oppression they have identified in the previous phases of the cycle. As I ask participants to be curious about the broader implications of their experience, I also acknowledge the challenge and risk of enacting certain new behaviors, and the social constraints on choice of action. This phase often works well in a small group format, so that peers can help each other identify what needs to be changed, and how. Role-plays can provide participants with an opportunity to apply their concepts to real-world contexts, and to practice new ways of being in their bodies in a relatively safe and supportive environment.

As a facilitator, I find it helpful to remind participants to stay connected to their embodied experience as they play with new behaviors, and to refer back to the integrated distillation of meaning in the previous phase to assess if the experimental ways of being in the world differently help to shift it. For example, I might suggest a participant experiment with keeping their ribcage lifted in the face of perceived scrutiny or judgment about their gender presentation. To be clear, it’s not that lifting their ribcage is a certain and complete solution to the problem of feeling judged (or being judged) around trans* body image, but that lifting their ribcage will *change their experience* the next time they’re in that situation, and may lead to other changes in them (for example, feeling pride instead of shame) or others (showing respect for their embodied difference because of the way they carry themselves).

The real-life response to a participant’s experiments sends them into a new round of the cycle, based on this new experience of being in their body differently. Depending on how their experiment worked, they may go back into the reflection and conceptualization phases to adjust their understanding of the issue, or develop refinements of action. Each encounter changes them, orients them to the problem or issue in a slightly (or hugely) different way, and being intentional about embodied critical reflection, integrated distillation, and embodied critical experimentation allows them to keep learning in a proactive way.

Lastly, working this cycle should also attend to closure, acknowledgment, and the celebration of learning. Although engaging with one complete turn through the cycle to the “embodied critical experimentation” stage usually leaves participants with a sense of completion and orientation, as a facilitator, I think about how to build in the space and

time for all participants to shift safely out of deeply interoceptive or emotionally charged states before they leave the class or session. I usually end my sessions with an opportunity for participants to share what was learned, and to identify next steps in their process.

Program Evaluation Using the Cycle of Embodied Critical Transformation

The cycle of embodied critical transformation described on the preceding pages is designed to help participants grasp and transform the experience of oppression in their bodies. As a facilitator, I believe it's important to know if this happened, and to understand what elements of the program design and facilitation supported or hindered that process. Although practitioners working outside formal agency and institutional settings may not consider assessment an essential part of their facilitation, making evaluative mechanisms explicit and intentional can be helpful, even in individual counseling. Having clear assessment strategies helps us to understand what kind of learning (and change) is really taking place, and supports and directs our efforts as facilitators.

Program evaluation can be structured on the same cycle pattern as the model of embodied critical learning, using the same four phases:

- First, I gather participant feedback about the **experience**, both during and after the session. I ask what worked and didn't work, and often focus specifically on embodied sensation and integrated distillation, as I have learned from numerous previous evaluations that this is where participants often struggle.
- I then **reflect** on this information, and add it to my own impressions. I **distill** these reflections into broad themes that "feel right" in my body when I consider their meaning.
- Using these themes, I revise the program or my facilitation strategies accordingly, and **experiment** with them the next time I facilitate.

Over the years, these evaluative strategies have had a significant impact on the structure, content, and delivery of the cycle. I have also come to understand some of the aspects of this cycle most valued by those who engage with it. Consistently, participants express feeling validated by a process that recognizes how much of oppression is enacted through the body. They are often relieved to realize that they are not 'overreacting' when they are sensitive to embodied microaggressions or struggle with body image. Participant feedback has also underscored how important it is to cultivate the living body as a resource for personal resiliency and social advocacy. In the same way that somatic trauma models (Levine, 1997; Ogden, Minton and Pain, 2006) emphasize resourcing before repairing, participants remark on how important it feels to engage in diversity work that feels strengthening and grounding (rather than discouraging or shaming).

Conclusion

Social justice remains one of our most pressing and intransigent issues, especially in the face of escalating environmental and economic concerns. With the increasing recognition of the body's role in social interactions, a more embodied approach to diversity and anti-oppression work is a timely addition to the tools and strategies already in use among helping professionals. The model of embodied critical learning described in this paper offers one way to work with the embodied experience of oppression that focuses on the lived experience of the oppressed, and offers strategies for grasping and transforming that experience.

BIOGRAPHY

Rae Johnson, PhD, RSW, RSMT is the associate chair of the somatic studies/ specialization in depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute, and directs the Institute for Embodiment Studies, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to advancing interdisciplinary scholarship on the lived experience of the body. Dr. Johnson presents internationally and has held leadership roles in somatic psychology at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute, Naropa University, Meridian University and the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.
Email: raejohnsonsonomatic@gmail.com

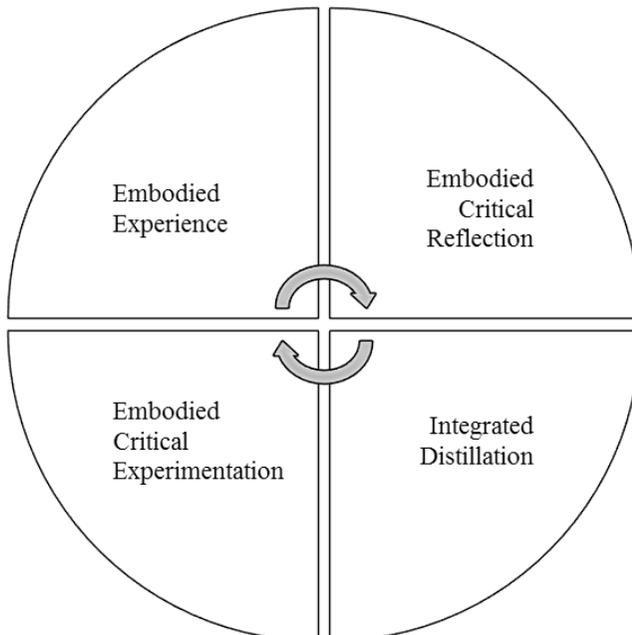
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Figure 1: Cycle of embodied critical transformation



WRITING ABOUT BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY

An invitation to write for us, with us, with support along the way. Your writing can contribute to and enrich the 'body' of critical and reflective content, as well as to the clinical expertise, in the 'field' of body psychotherapy.

Whom can you write for?

We suggest that – for a professional article – you consider:

The EABP/USABP peer-reviewed **International Body Psychotherapy Journal** (for original work only): www.ibpj.org

The peer-reviewed journal of Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy (for original work only): www.tandfonline.com/toc/tbmd20/current#.VBfpFS6wJRU

Or: (for German language authors) **körper – tanz – bewegung**; Zeitschrift für Körperpsychotherapie und Kreativtherapie: www.reinhardt-verlag.de/de/zeitschrift/51830

(You will find the necessary “instructions for authors” on their various websites.)

Or: for something a bit more conversational: **Somatic Psychotherapy Today**:

<https://www.SomaticPsychotherapyToday.com>

Or: Something for a newsletter of your particular professional association, modality association, or national association in psychotherapy;

Or: A comment or a thread in one of the **Somatic Perspectives LinkedIn** group discussions, facilitated by Serge Prengel: www.linkedin.com/somaticperspectives.com

Or: Possibly, a chapter for an edited book, on a particular theme, possibly like one of the series being published by Body Psychotherapy Publications (**BPP**):

www.bodypsychotherapypublications.com.

Or: Something to be published somewhere else, at some other time, in a different medium; or for a personal internet blog; or . . . maybe just for your personal journal.

What can you write about?

You can write about attending a recent Congress, or seminar, or about attending a different event; - or about your student thesis; - or your experience of writing your student thesis; - or a special or particularly interesting case history; - or an aspect of your personal therapy; - or about working with a particular client group; - or about a development of theory or practice; or - even about your reflections on the field of Body Psychotherapy.

How to get started writing professionally?

There is an article in the journal of Body, Movement & Dance in Psychotherapy www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17432979.2010.530060#.VBfsNC6wJRU (You can also find a free copy here.)

And there are some recent guidelines about how to write a professional Body Psychotherapy Case Study: www.eabp.org/researchcase-study-guidelines.php. There are also many articles on the Internet (in different languages) about how to write.

If you want any further assistance with where to publish, or with the process of editing, or re-editing, or with the complications of the publication process, the following people may be able to offer you some help.

They are all professional body psychotherapists, editors and writers:

Nancy Eichhorn: Nancy@NancyEichhorn.com

Jacqueline Carleton: jacarletonphd@gmail.com

Gill Westland: gillwestland@cbpc.org.uk

Jennifer Tantia: JFTantia@gmail.com

Courtenay Young: courtenay@courtenay-young.com

Sincerely,

EABP Publications Committee

<http://www.eabp.org/publications.php>

Squaring the Circle: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice About the EABP Collaborative Practice Research Network (CPRN)

The awareness of the importance of fostering different models of research, particularly those linked more closely to the actual practice of body psychotherapy and those encouraging a two-way communication between researchers and practitioners, has led to the creation of the EABP Collaborative Practice Research Network.

This is an exciting new initiative to provide a forum for dialogue, debate and the development of innovative and creative research methods and projects that assist clinical practice and help body psychotherapy (and/or somatic psychology) to develop an empirical underpinning of its professional practice.

The aim is to broaden knowledge of the field of body psychotherapy through communities of practice and clinical research. It explores how a CPRN can transform perceptions of psychotherapy research and practice, strengthen connections between members, and encourage continuous development and co-creation among participants. This important initiative is an opportunity to make a significant difference within our profession and to develop – together – the foundations of both scientific and clinical practice research.

Specifically, we are planning to explore and develop, at local and international levels, a variety of strategies to support practitioners' research and look at what types of research potentially provide a broadening of our understanding and practice of psychotherapy, and how various types of research advance, improve and extend our knowledge of body psychotherapy. We will do this by bringing together practitioners and researchers from around the world, both online and face-to-face, to discuss ways of bridging the gap between clinical practice and research.

The committee has organized two symposiums in conjunction with the 2012 and 2014 EABP Congresses. The next symposium will be held during the 15th European Congress of Body Psychotherapy in Athens Greece, 13-16th October 2016.

We would like to invite you to join us and become part of this exciting and innovative initiative. If you are interested please contact Sheila Butler and Herbert Grassmann - cprn@eabp.org

EABP Science and Research Committee - Sheila Butler, Herbert Grassmann (chairperson), Frank Röhrich, Maurizio Stupiggia, Joop Valstar, Courtenay Young and Jennifer Tantia www.eabp.org/research-scientific-committee.php

Strengthening links between practitioners and researchers at every stage of the process

News:

The Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR), an association devoted to the development and dissemination of research on psychotherapy has some exciting upcoming SPR events:

- *The International Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, USA* in June 2015 from 24th to 27th June.
- *The European Conference on Psychotherapy Research* in Klagenfurt, Austria, September 24th to 27th, 2015, and the planned 2016 International Meeting in Jerusalem, Israel in June 2016.

You might also like to browse the Psychotherapy Research Journal pages, especially the Special Issues and the online resources; there is a lot of information on the integration of theoretical, empirical and clinical knowledge in psychotherapy. See <http://www.psychotherapyresearch.org>

INTERNATIONAL BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY JOURNAL

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RESEARCH ISSUE

Guest Editor: Jennifer F. Tantia, PhD, BC-DMT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

04 INTRODUCTION

Jacqueline A. Carleton, PhD

SO MEASURE IT

Marcel DuClos

06 EDITORIAL

Jennifer F. Tantia, PhD, BC-DMT

08 AURORA Cover Image

Aline LaPierre, PhD

ARTICLES

10 Reading and Evaluating Quantitative Research in Body Psychotherapy

Robyn Flaum Cruz, PhD & Sabine C. Koch, PhD

20 Biodynamic Psychotherapy for Trauma Recovery: A Pilot Study

Denise Saint Arnault, PhD & Sharon O'Halloran

35 Correlations Between Tests for Grounding, Breathing and Self-efficacy in Individuals With and Without Chronic Pain: Who is "Standing with Both Feet on the Ground?"

Christina Bader-Johansson, M.Sc. & Amanda Lundvik Gyllensten, Med.Dr, RCPT

48 Semantic Expressions of the Body Boundary Personality in Person-centred Psychotherapy

Laura A. Cariola, PhD

65 Interoception: A Measure of Embodiment or Attention?

Nitasha Buldeo, MS, MSc

80 Grasping and Transforming the Embodied Experience of Oppression

Rae Johnson, PhD, RSW, RSMT

STUDENT RESEARCH SECTION

96 United States Masters' and Doctoral dissertation abstracts

Abstracts of the three winning papers of the EABP Student Research Award

CONFERENCE REVIEW

103 EABP Science and Research Symposium

at the 14th European and 10th International Congress of Body Psychotherapy:

The Body in Relationship: Self—Other—Society

Nancy Eichhorn, PhD



E U R O P E A N
A S S O C I A T I O N F O R
B O D Y -
P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y



Connecting professionals, exchanging expertise, enabling collaboration

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