

Somatic Psychology: Its Relevance for Psychology and Psychotherapy

Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind and Meaning

By Linda Hartley

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What is somatic psychology and why is it relevant for psychology and psychotherapy? In her book called *Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind and Meaning*, British dance movement therapist and psychotherapist Linda Hartley attempts to explain the theories and practices of somatic psychology. In so doing, she does a valuable service by introducing an important dimension of psychology—the psychological body—to healthcare professionals.

Hartley situates theories of somatic psychology within a “holistic approach to therapy and healing that embraces body, mind, and spirit within a changing social, cultural, and spiritual context” (p. 1). Somatic psychology challenges traditional models of Cartesian dualism in which contemporary scientific psychology was born. It “calls for a revision of the way in which we address sickness in the individual, as well as the imbalances and conflicts prevalent in our social, political, and ecological environment” (p. 1). Rather than focusing on the reduction of symptoms as the outcome of therapy, somatic psychology: a) seeks to empower and educate people about their bodies b) teaches them to sense when there are problems, and how to cultivate a sense of well-being c) helps them understand the meaning and the unconscious messages of their symptoms, and integrate these into daily life.

Definition of Terms

The term *somatics* introduced by Thomas Hanna (Hanna, 1970), refers to an experiential study of the body. Instead of studying the body as an object from outside itself, as does behavioral psychology, somatic psychology studies the body as a subject from inside itself. It relies on--and believes in--the inherent wisdom of the body to heal itself. As an essentially democratic therapy, it de-emphasizes clients' dependence on

authority figures of doctors or therapists and emphasizes client empowerment and self-care. Using techniques like breathing exercises to increase consciousness of subtle bodily processes in what Hartley calls the *bodymind* somatic psychology practitioners educate clients to become aware of their own health status and practice corrective techniques. Like dreamwork, somatic psychology helps people to access symbols and unconscious messages locked in the body and resolve blocks that are due to past trauma. Accessing the symbolic content of bodymind symptoms helps clients understand the meaning of their illness and integrate this understanding into their psychological process. In addition, the therapeutic relationship in somatic psychology is not only non-authoritarian, but is also based on both verbal and non-verbal cues of an “embodied relationship between therapist and client” (p. 7). The field of somatic psychology is now becoming integrated with psychotherapy with the use of practices that Hartley describes as somatic psychotherapy. The therapeutic relationship as a focus is added by the “body therapies” or “body psychotherapies;” the bridge, therefore, between psychotherapy and somatic therapy is somatic psychology.

Early Pioneers

Hartley reviews the early pioneers of somatic psychology, including Freud, Ferenczi, Adler, Reich and Jung. Key developments from these psychology pioneers include Adler’s notion of “expressive movement” (Anspacher and Anspacher, 1956), Jourard’s “somatic disclosure and perception of the soma” (Jourard, 1994) and “somatic resonance” (Reich, 1970) Whereas Freud’s psychology was based on a Cartesian mechanistic physics of static and limited energy, somatic psychology is based on a twentieth century physics of quantum mechanics (Bohm, 1980, Capra, 1975). Next,

Hartley cites relevant research studies from new fields of psychoneuroimmunology (Pert, 1999) the psychobiology of the bodymind connection (Rossi, 1986), and visual imagery (Simonton et al 1980) to support somatic psychology. Finally, pioneers from the field of ecology are noted who bring a larger perspective to somatic psychology that connects individual and group psychology to the “ecosystem” (Lovelock, 1991). Somatic practices that are based on the work of these pioneers from psychology, physics, psychobiology and ecology include sensory awareness, Feldenkrais, body-mind centering and dance/movement therapy.

Somatic Practices

Turning to specific somatic practices, Hartley describes how somatic therapy works clinically. First, somatic therapy reveals the “sensory engram” (Juhan, 1987, 272) that carries the template of each person’s history of learned experiences, as well as the “muscular armoring” that reveals “character type” (Lowen, 1976a). Perinatal experiences and separation at birth can bring about both fear of life and fear of death (Otto Rank, in Brown, 1961), which is specifically addressed in therapies such as primal therapy, rebirthing, and holotropic therapy (Grof, 1985). Early experiences of attachment and separation that are critical for mature relationships (Bowlby, 1997-1998) are stored in body memories, whereas traumatic memories are stored in state-dependent learning (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1989). These early learned experience influence subsequent perceptions and experiences in what is called “preconceived expectations” and “pre-motor focusing” in body-mind centering (Cohen, 1993, 117). Developmental psychology reinforces the idea of a core self that emerges during the first few months of life (Stern, 1985). Energy psychologies that have developed ways to access these bodily memories

include core energetics (Pierrakos, 1990), dance/movement therapy and authentic movement (Whitehouse, 1999). Each of these practices includes a clinical vignette and brief discussion of the therapeutic issues and process. Finally, Hartley discusses the ethics of somatic psychology, including a section on the indications and contraindications of touch in therapy.

Although *Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind and Meaning* very helpfully introduces concepts, theoreticians and practices to a psychological audience, it nevertheless has some fairly serious flaws. First, its attempt to clarify the various terms such as somatic therapy and body psychotherapy leads to further contradictions, redundancies and confusion. Second, its style reads somewhat like a graduate thesis or dissertation; there are too many quotations, too much reliance on secondary sources, and a lack of clear sequencing in chapter organization. Finally, Hartley overemphasizes some somatic practices (such as her own of mind-body centering), while leaving out significant areas of other practices (she reduces dance/movement therapy to one practice known as authentic movement). Because Hartley is British and her description of the professional topography of somatic psychology may be different than the American field, she nevertheless should present a balanced and well-organized curriculum for the students and practitioners of psychology who will read this book.

Summary

In summary, *Somatic Psychology: Body, Mind and Meaning* by Linda Hartley introduces an important field of somatic psychology for the education and training of psychologists. It is recommended that this book be read by psychology students, teachers

and clinical supervisors so that they may expand their understanding of a growing field and be clinically responsible about practices their patients may already be experiencing.

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