BOOK REVIEW · 2007

Review: Handbook of Body Psychotherapy

By Michael Soth

A review of a major handbook of body psychotherapy — examining the state of the field as captured in this comprehensive volume, and assessing how far the various contributions represent genuine developments beyond the first two phases of body psychotherapy into the relational, integrative territory which the field needs to inhabit.

KEY THEMES

— State of the body psychotherapy field

— What the handbook captures and what it misses

— The relational turn within body psychotherapy

— Body psychotherapy and the broader psychotherapy field

— Future directions for body psychotherapy

The Field's Self-Portrait

A handbook of body psychotherapy offers the field a chance to see itself whole — to assess, across the diversity of its schools and approaches, what has been achieved and what remains to be done. The handbook under review is a substantial achievement in this regard: it brings together contributions from many of the most significant practitioners and theorists in the field, and it provides an accessible and comprehensive overview of body psychotherapy's current state.

What strikes the reader most forcibly is the range and diversity of the field. Body psychotherapy is not a single approach but a constellation of approaches, united by the commitment to working with the body as a primary therapeutic instrument but divergent in their theoretical frameworks, their clinical methods, and their understanding of what makes therapy therapeutic. The handbook does justice to this diversity without forcing artificial consensus.

What the handbook cannot help but reflect is the field's characteristic tensions — between the older post-Reichian schools with their confident body-as-primary-instrument approach, and the newer relational and integrative approaches which have learned to question the assumptions on which that confidence was based.

What the Handbook Captures

The handbook's greatest strengths lie in its coverage of the established body psychotherapy traditions — bioenergetics, biosynthesis, Hakomi, process-oriented psychology, sensorimotor psychotherapy. These are presented with clarity and depth, and the diversity of the contributions makes clear that body psychotherapy has developed a sophisticated clinical culture with real clinical wisdom accumulated over many decades.

The handbook also captures something of the field's engagement with neuroscience — the growing evidence base for somatic approaches to trauma, the theoretical frameworks provided by polyvagal theory, attachment theory, and interpersonal neurobiology. This engagement reflects a genuine maturation of the field and its growing confidence in contributing to the broader psychotherapy conversation.

Less well captured is the relational dimension of body psychotherapy's development — the recognition, developed primarily at the Chiron Centre and in related approaches, that the therapist's own embodied subjectivity is not merely a technical instrument but a primary clinical vehicle, and that working with the body requires a full engagement with the countertransference and the relational field.

What Still Needs to Be Done

Body psychotherapy, despite its achievements, remains a field that is more comfortable with the somatic dimension than with the relational one. The handbook reflects this: there is more attention to what the therapist does with the client's body than to what happens between two embodied people in the therapeutic relationship.

The next step for body psychotherapy — which a few contributions in the handbook gesture towards but none fully achieves — is the development of a genuinely integral-relational practice: one that holds the somatic sensitivity of the body psychotherapy tradition in full integration with the relational sophistication of contemporary psychoanalysis. This would require body psychotherapy to engage more fully with the implications of the countertransference revolution, and specifically with the concept of embodied countertransference as the primary clinical tool.

Until body psychotherapy makes this integration fully — not just theoretically but in its clinical culture, its training, and its supervision — it will remain a field that has made a vital contribution to psychotherapy but has not yet fully occupied the territory it has staked out.

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