

NANCY EICHHORN

Sexuality, Spirituality and the Body: The Art and Science of Somatic Psychotherapy A Review Nancy Eichhorn

International Body Psychotherapy Journal *The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis*
Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2017 pp 74 - 76. ISSN 2169-4745 Printing, ISSN 2168-1279 Online
© Author and USABP/EABP. Reprints and permissions secretariat@eabp.org

Sexuality and spirituality are not typically spoken about in the same stance, even less so in the psychotherapy room. Talking about clients' religious and spiritual beliefs and using them as a therapeutic tool remains controversial. Freud considered exploring a client's religious/spiritual beliefs potentially beneficial in the same vein as one explores fantasies and illusions—to move from the unscientific analysis of what's occurring in a client's mind to accessing the more scientific/deeper truths of the psyche (Kersting, 2003). While Oxhandler, Parrish, Torres and Achenbaum (2015), in their recent study on the value of religion/spirituality in the therapeutic process, learned that 80% (of the therapists interviewed) responded that it was useful only a minority said they used it in practice.

As well, sex is still an uncomfortable topic for many clients, and, in fact many therapists, to address (Harris & Hays, 2008; Weaver, 2012). It's not necessarily clear "what constitutes sexual issues (considering there is a wide range of acceptable sexual behaviors, experiences, and attitudes in the modern world), and possibly a lack of guidelines for how to address sexual issues that may be occurring in client relationships" (Weaver, 2012). At times, as well, clients may confide sexual concerns, whether regarding their own sense of sexuality or sexual dysfunction, but most therapists are not trained in this field of study; perhaps lost in their own discomfort and confusion with the topic, therapists may refer their clients to specially trained "sex therapists".

Yet, The United States Association for Body Psychotherapy's Summer 2016 conference boldly focused on Sexuality, Spirituality and the Body: The Art and Science of Somatic Psychotherapy.

Attendees—152 in total—traveled from as far as Japan to network with colleagues in the fields of somatic psychology and body psychotherapy. The conference offered participants the chance to experience a sense of coming together on diverse topics to find common ground as well as to promote this field of study and give body psychotherapy a bigger voice worldwide. Both USABP President Beth Haessig and USABP Vice President Dan Mingle, MBA acknowledged the association's positive position as the "hub of everything somatic". They noted the Association's growth citing membership (including institutional memberships), their new administrator Linda Heck (who did an excellent job putting the conference together and running it in Rhode Island) and their redesigned website.

The three-day conference integrated body based activities (such as bio energetics and yoga) with keynote addresses and workshops ranging from sensual and sexual experiences to sexual and spiritual messages in the body and integrating spirituality in body psychotherapy. Workshop titles included (but were not limited to): healing the trauma of sexual abuse through the synergy of talk and touch; sexuality and the sacred; the heart of integrating sexuality and spirituality; sexual

pleasure in light of intersubjectivity, neuroscience, infant research, relational psychoanalysis and recognition theory.

There was also space for poster presentations and discussion, and professional recognition. Denise Saint-Arnault, PhD, RN shared her research on mind-body and culturally-tailored-interventions to promote mental and physical health for women from a variety of cultures. Robyn Flaum Cruz, a professor of expressive therapies and a dance/movement therapy instructor, was honored with the Alice K. Ladas Research Award, and Eugene Gendlin received the USABP Life Time Achievement Award, which Ann Cornell Weiser accepted on his behalf.

Three Keynotes

Dr. Barratt challenged the audience with his philosophical perspectives on the significance of “bodymind” visioning for the profession and the planet. A self-proclaimed “radical” currently teaching/living in South Africa, Dr. Barratt was quite clear that too many diverse perspectives on what healing is as well as far too much divisiveness in our movement (body psychotherapy) perplexed our system. We need a unified vision, he said. Per Dr. Barratt, few health care practitioners know what healing is, mistaking it as manipulating or changing something—adapting to the environment. Healing, he said has an inner meaning. It is holistic and addresses the irresolvable concepts of life and involves movement of subtle energy.

He discussed cultural impacts and cultural divisions (i.e., class, race, social economics) and the impact of subjugation and domination on the healing process—I’m here to heal you (the “otherness” inherent in the language alone). Denial is not the answer—it only serves to perpetuate the imbalances already in place, he said, then explained that life is suffering and we will not escape suffering because of our egotism, our dividedness. Our need to dominate perpetuates suffering, he said. We can’t abolish the differences between cultures; we cannot homogenize cultures any more than we can deny differences between species, between the sexes, between children and adults, he said. He stressed that our focus must be on how to relate to differentiation, not only in healing but also across our profession.

Joan Borysenko arrived late and exhausted due to an airline crisis yet shared such pertinent information with such passion that she received a standing ovation (and some hands-on energy work at the end of her session). Dr Borysenko’s career started in science and research. Intrigued by the nature of the mind and body, she joined others investigating mindfulness and the concept that the mind and body are embodied and embedded in our relationships. She discussed traits/qualities that facilitated healing relationships, including empathy and love and then offered the impact of stress on the body/mind (noting the ACE Study—adverse childhood experiences— conducted by Kaiser Permanente in the late 1990s). She spent much time on what she considered the biggest news of the decade in the field of bodymind science—the mighty microbiome.

According to Dr. Borysenko, we have three genomes: our parents, our epigenome and our microbiome where our genetics/genes are present in gut bacteria. In fact, “three pounds of beasties have an ecosystem (in our gut) that function to”: keep our gut lining intact (leaky gut syndrome can result in autoimmune diseases); regulate our weight and our immune function; reduce inflammation, and regulate mood by making neurotransmitters. She shared information about new uses of “poop” and the new medical practice of using “poop donors” for fecal transplants to cure C-Difficile. According to Dr. Borysenko, when babies are born via C-section, they do not get the transfer of bacteria from the mother, which leads to mental health problems—the bacteria are important to our neurotransmitters.

NANCY EICHHORN

Dr. Borysenko indicated that diagnoses of anxiety and depression are increasing in our culture because the food we eat changes the bacteria in our gut. We must talk with our clients about the food they eat, she said, because gut microbes shape human behavior. As an example, she recounted her and her husband's experience when they became "fundamentalist low fat vegans" because her husband's lipids were high. Calling the 'food' they endured for 14 months "organic cardboard", she said that they were so strict with their veganism they both became sick/sicker. Her concluding point was that no one diet fits all people—each body responds to food in its own way—and that as clinicians it is essential that we become aware of the interplay between nutrients and health (mental, physical and spiritual).

Michael Mannion discussed Wilhelm Reich, his work and his life. Per Mannion, Reich was "a pioneer in the scientific study of Life Energy" who "took this concept out of the realm of metaphysical and philosophical hypothesis and gave mankind a fundamentally new understanding of Life Energy as physical, demonstrable, measurable and usable." Mannion said that Reich's "study of energy—in the microscopic, macroscopic and cosmic realms—forced him to transcend the artificial barriers separating these disciplines." Mannion also offered that Reich coined the term 'Sexual Revolution' to describe the human struggle to create natural healthy love lives. Further, Mannion said that Reich fought for women's political and economic equality and reproductive rights, including contraception and abortion on demand. He advocated for sexual education for adolescents and their right to full sexual love lives.

In Conclusion

While the keynote addresses did not directly relate to spirituality or sexuality, the plenary session conducted by Barnaby B. Barratt, PhD, on "Is Our Access to 'God' Sourced in our Loins? The Spiritual Call of Sexuality and Death" in conjunction with the daily workshops (based on the titles) indicate an intersection between the two. Numerous experiential sessions were designed to explore the body and support one's sensual and sexual experience. Considering Dr. Barratt's spotlight on differences and homogenizing our cultural realities, it was a relief to see workshops offered dealing with LGBT issues, gender identity and sexuality, on somatic resilience in gay men, colorism, and erotic recovery. While these topics may not yet be easily integrated into the psychotherapy setting, it appears that the clinicians who are involved offer a safe and innovative container in which to explore.

REFERENCES

- Harris, S. M., & Hays, K. W. (2008). Family therapist comfort with and willingness to discuss client sexuality. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2008.00066.x
- Kersting, K. (2003). Religion and spirituality in the treatment room. *Monitor on Psychology* 34(11). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/encountering-america/201507/should-we-talk-about-religion-in-therapy>
- Oxhandler, H. K., Parrish, E. E., Torres, L. R., & Achenbaum, W. A. (2015). The integration of clients' religion and spirituality in social work practice: A national survey, *Social Work*, 60 (3): 228. doi 10.1093/sw/swv018
- Weaver, R. (2012). The importance of addressing sexual issues in general therapy. Retrieved from <http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/sexual-issues-general-therapy-0322126/>