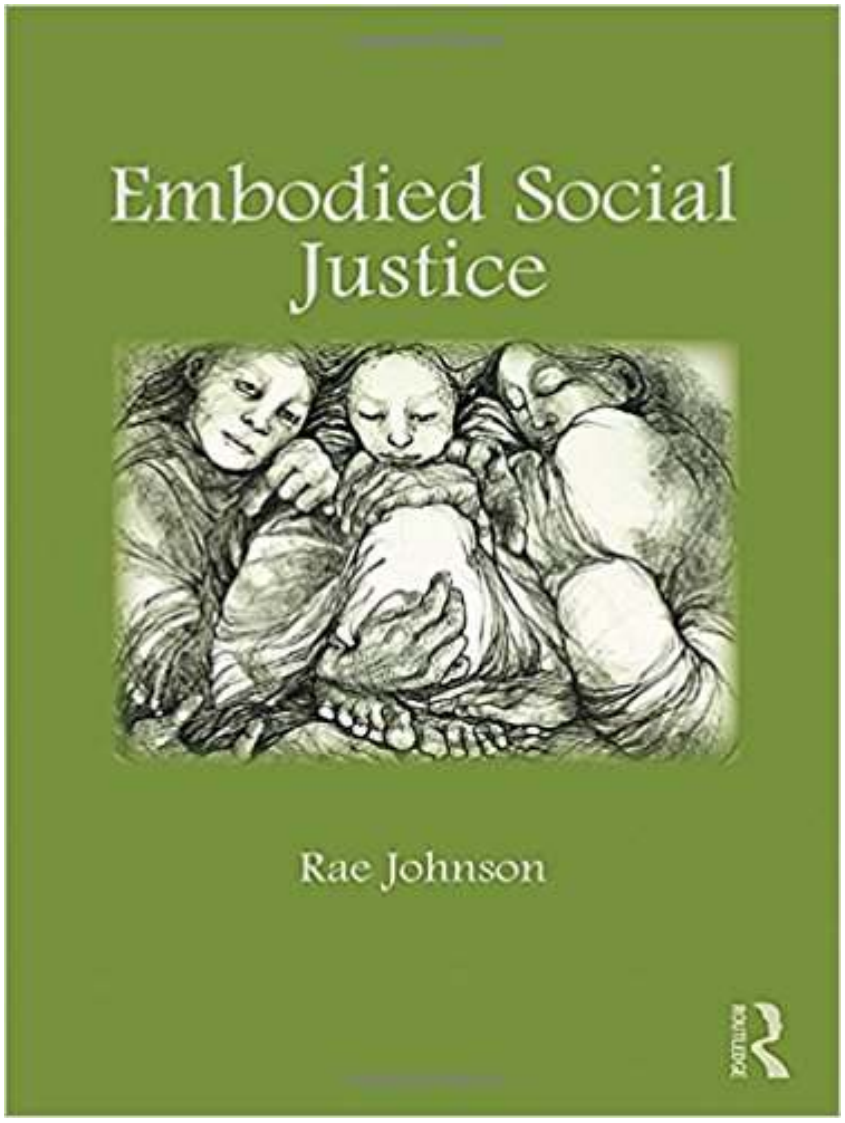


Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

A story to start, to illustrate potent nuances that, without awareness, perpetuate inequality outside our conscious intentions. And to thank Dr. Johnson.

Reading this book, I realized the subtle ways in which I have experienced being in a position of power and being overpowered. I understand what it's like to be in charge and to be subjugated in a cognitive sense; what I didn't quite get was my own bodily experience of feeling oppressed or feeling powerful. Reading the narratives, experiencing these women's stories as well as learning about Dr. Johnson's 'Cycle for Embodied Critical Learning and Transformation', which was

designed to help participants "grasp and transform the experience of oppression in their body" (pg. 117), I now have a template to conceptualize and experiment with as I connect with a bodily sense of my day-to-day experience.

My Story

I was reviewing an essay from a regular writer for this issue (Winter, 2018). Emma writes from Bristol, UK. I edit from Carmichael, California, USA. We both speak English. We both write using what we call the English language. I, however, conform to the Americanized version. As usual, I automatically changed spellings so that words like realised (British version) were corrected (in my mind) to realized. After editing and noting comments for revisions, I was just on the spur of sending Emma the essay when I realized/realised that my changing the spelling because it did not conform to my system, well it was oppressive, it created an "imbalance in social justice" to cite Johnson. Changing the spellings sent the message that my way was the right way; it became a matter good and bad, of right and wrong. Having read, and honestly still in the process of reading Johnson's book, I felt how my power as the editor and publisher of this magazine overrode another human being's way of spelling words that, in Emma's country, were perfectly legit. I noticed, for the first time with this much intensity, that I have power; whereas, most of my life I've felt powerless, the underdog with little to no control in my life or the lives of other people. This sense of imbalance jolted me from a state of oblivion to a reality such that I emailed the author, explained what happened, shared my reflections. I then revised all those spellings back to their original state of being.

Status Quo

It is amazingly simple to remain unaware. To hear news stories, commentaries on blogs and newsfeeds about social injustice and simply brush it aside. There's this notion that life, worldwide, is not fair. Racism and gender inequality exist. The controversy about changing gender identifications and bathroom use is but one of many examples stirring up emotional responses.

Even pronoun use has moved beyond he and she, her and him. I was struck when reading Johnson's book and came across the use of the word 'they' in the biography:

"Rae Johnson, Ph.D., RSMT, is a queer-identified social worker, somatic movement therapist, and scholar working at the intersection of somatic studies and social justice. They chair the Somatic Studies and Depth Psychology program at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California."

My initial reaction was like, well that's weird. Then I thought it must be a copyediting error. But in reading this book I realized the error was mine. Staying rooted in my sleepy world, stuck in my status quo, I was not accounting for radical changes happening around me

that need to happen within me, present, awake, aware. To honor Johnson's language, I will use 'they' and 'them' in place of she and he and her and him respectively.

To cite a clear nutshell that serves the best interest of this book:

"Embodied Social Justice introduces a body-centered approach to working with oppression, designed for social workers, counselors, educators, and other human service professionals. Grounded in current research, this integrative approach to social justice works directly with the implicit knowledge of our bodies to address imbalances in social power. Consisting of a conceptual framework, case examples, and a model of practice, Embodied Social Justice integrates key findings from education, psychology, traumatology, and somatic studies while addressing critical gaps in how these fields have understood and responded to everyday issues of social justice."

The Book

Physically speaking, the hardbound book is small (6-ish inches by 9.5 inches). Each sentence is a tad over four inches in length (lots of white space on the page). Even the font size and spacing between sentences is small. There are 146 some odd pages. Incredible information is jammed into tight spaces, which felt oppressive to me. It was hard to read simply because of the formatting, the layout. I felt frustrated. The content mattered to me. I wanted to access it freely, easily. I wanted to focus on being part of it not struggle to align my eyesight, squint to read (and no, I do not need reading glasses, my eyesight is quite good close-up, it's distances that require mediation).

There are three parts after the introduction, which offers a practical example, a frame of the issues, and an overview of the book. Part 1: Body Stories starts with a discussion on embodied inquiry then moves into the participants' stories. It ends with Chapter 8: Learning From The Body Stories, divided into five themes (each further subdivided) and discusses implications for embodied social justice.

Part II covers Oppression and Embodiment with chapters on (un)learning oppression and learning through the body. Part III: Grasping and Transforming the Embodied Experience of Oppression offers chapters covering: The Cycle of embodied critical learning and Transformation; Implications and Applications and Community Resources.

Reflections on my Experience

Despite physical challenges reading the book, I changed because of the experiences I had with the content. My awareness of diversity and oppression in my body, and in the bodies and lives of those around me is no longer the same. My naïve innocence shattered by the truth of my truly not knowing. None of this would have come about if I was engaged with the text. Johnson's writing style clearly resonated with me. Although the book is written for a professional audience—the material is exact, referenced, articulate—it differs from the typical dry scholarly tone associated with academic articles. Their use of metaphor and description is practiced, polished,

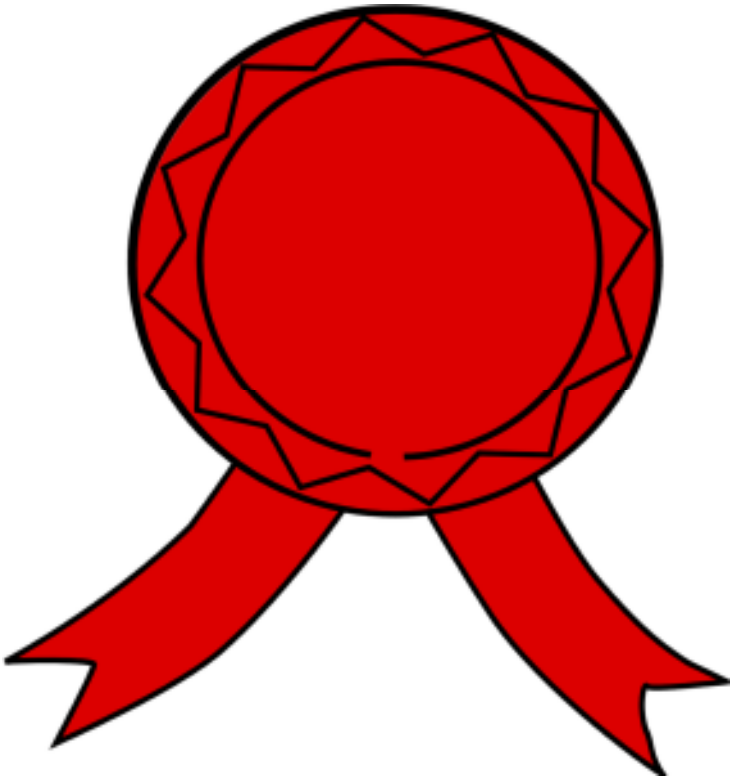
creative, riveting.

Johnson offers an interweave of story, reflection and quotation to utilize other people's perceptions. Simple statements merge into significant moments of detail portraying the lasting impacts of our life events, like they story about the red badge.

When Johnson was 7-years-old, as part of a system-wide physical fitness test, they went through the measures. They assumed, being academically excelled, that they would earn a gold or silver badge. The red badge was given just for showing up, just for having a body, Johnson writes. Although they discarded most childhood memorabilia, they have kept the red badge that they received that day. Its message, Johnson writes, " . . . told me that as far as my body was concerned, my contribution to the world was unremarkable" (page 45).

We are in their vulnerability, in the frame of their reality, and then we're pulled outward to their compassion, to a wider embrace as they recognize their own "privilege" in their stories and that even their "tolerant apathy toward" their "body" that they described "is a luxury some cannot afford" (page 45). Johnson is in themselves and they are aware of their presence in the large sense of society and justice.

Discussing microaggressions, a term coined by Chester Pierce, Johnson likens microagressions to "relational paper cuts" because these types of cuts seem small and insignificant, but, in truth can be extremely painful. They're hard for others to see, Johnson writes, and at times you don't even feel the pain until after it happens, and it



can linger for a long time (pg. 55). Johnson takes these potent concepts and brings them into being with examples we all can relate to, even if we haven't necessarily had them ourselves. Johnson notes in Chapter 11 that as facilitators, we need to enter a teaching situation with "awareness of our own potential triggers, blind spots, expectations, assumptions and projections" (pg. 114).

Johnson lives this quote.

Body Stories

The "body stories" shared in Part 1 highlight the participants' experiences in an extremely alive and embodied way. There are six stories, including Johnson's narrative. I found the inclusion of Johnson's own body story courageous and insightful. Johnson opens the narrative explaining the reasoning, and quite rightfully admits that

Continued no page 64

they cannot protect their own anonymity as they did for the other participants. Johnson is out there, front and center, a position that I personally try my best to avoid.

Johnson shares that their decision was motivated by several factors: (1) ethics—don't ask someone else to do something you, yourself have not done, nor would be unwilling to do; (2) writing their own body story allowed them to appreciate the courage and risk the participants were taking and guided them process of trying to do justice to their efforts; (3) writing their story opened their eyes to aspects of embodied experiences not necessary addressed in other places allowing them to explore more deeply with other participants; (4) it required them to stand behind a process that they were proposing as an act of political resistance through reclaiming embodied knowledge (material taken from page 43).

I appreciated the reflective nature and candor as Johnson shares their lived body experience via two stories: the story of their body as a shadow, and the counter-narrative of how their body resisted the pressure to disappear and in the end how their body got them to fall in love with it and with the bodies of others. I experienced Dr. Johnson differently than I did as a student, both in their classes and in their office seeking guidance, at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute (SBGI), and connecting with them over the years at conferences, via email, and so forth. A sense of depth comes to mind as I read

I appreciated the reflective nature and candor of Johnson sharing their lived experience via two stories: the story of the body as a shadow, and the counter-narrative of how the body resisted the pressure to disappear.

their story, like I was seeing 'Rae' for the first time even though I would openly say to people that I know Rae Johnson. As they writes, "Through this process, I have learned (and am still learning) how revealing myself to other people makes me more available to myself . . . Their purpose is to help me become more fully and

Oppression, Johnson writes, is a learned behavior (versus innate), and it can be unlearned.

consciously who I am, to practice getting at myself through visceral, embodied senses" (page 43).

The stories are offered and "unpacked" to "underscore to significance of the body as a source and site of social injustice, and provide new insight into the embodied lived experience of oppression" (pg. 53). Johnson looks at the themes that arose in the stories of somatic experiences of oppression then links them to "other research findings, anti-oppression theories and social justice commentaries" (pg. 53).

I considered one theme that involved the role of the body when navigating differences in power. Johnson notes experiences with interpersonal space (body based boundary markers), gestures and non-verbal expressions (to communicate power, privilege and social standing) and though not mentioned frequently, eye contact and the use of touch (Johnson writes that comments transcribed from the interviews were worth noting). Participants talked about their experiences involving embodied memory, somatic vigilance, and withdrawal or alienation from their body. Being oppressed had taught them how to pay attention to the aspects of nonverbal communication that reinforced their "inferior social status through nonverbal messages" (pg. 59).

According to Johnson, the themes that arose during the narratives illustrated the impact of oppressive interpersonal relations and how they distort "nonverbal communication, elicit traumatic somatic reactions, and engender body shame" (pg. 71).

Oppression, Johnson writes, is a learned behavior (versus innate), and it can be unlearned. Johnson created what they call their model of Embodied Critical Learning and Transformation, which is explained in Part III. Before introducing the model however, Johnson prepares readers with background information including: key concepts from anti-oppressive education; articulate strategies for a learning process that can consciously address issues of power, privilege and differences; and ways that address the somatic effects of oppression emphasizing the interpersonal nature of oppressive social dynamics and using existing beliefs and implicit frameworks in the learning process rather than asking learners to adopt new ones (see Chapter 9).

Chapter 10 focuses on somatic theory and practice. Johnson's intention is to provide "conceptual foundations and practical

Continued on page 66

strategies for learning through (and with) the subjective, felt experience of the body."

I often hear the word 'somatic' as in somatic psychology or one's somatic experience. And I have a sense of what it means. But, I haven't been able to easily share my definition with other people. Until now.

Henceforth, I will quote Johnson: "According to Hanna (1970), a somatic perspective is one that privileges the subjective felt experience of the body in understanding and working with human experience" (pg. 93).

I know, it sounds heady. But Johnson goes on to write that when we're involved in meaning making, what we have felt in our body is incorporated into what we think about the experience, and when we're working with the body, "our interventions are primarily informed and guided by the impact those interventions have on our bodily sense of ourselves" (pg. 93).

Entering Chapter 11, I learned that Johnson based their model on David Kolb's cycle of experiential learning and on Eugene Gendlin's focusing technique. Johnson shares how to use the model from two perspectives: (1) being involved in it; (2) being a facilitator of it. I appreciated Johnson's position regarding power and privilege in a teaching situation. Johnson treats learners as central to the process—they are not there to impart knowledge but rather to engage learners so they actively understand and can work with their own experiences.

The book moves into its ending with Chapter 12: Implications and Applications and Chapter 13: Community Resources. Lots of information for readers to explore.

There's more of a sensation in my chest and belly when I feel oppressed and there's more energy, a more assertive almost at times aggressive stance when I feel myself as the oppressor. It's become a lesson in being quieter, softer, slower. In connecting with my breath, feeling adrenaline swirl in my system, contacting the queasy-ness in my belly.

As I come about my own closure, I know that, as noted earlier, reading this book altered my previous way of being. I notice more, in smaller, paper cut sorts of ways. There's more of a sensation in my chest and belly when I feel oppressed, and there's more energy, a more assertive, almost at times aggressive stance when I feel myself as the oppressor. It's become a lesson in being quieter, softer, slower. In connecting with my breath, feeling adrenaline swirl in my system, contacting the queasy-ness in my belly. I want to be with people, on the page, in person, with a presence of equality and acceptance. I believe that intention is a good place to start.