

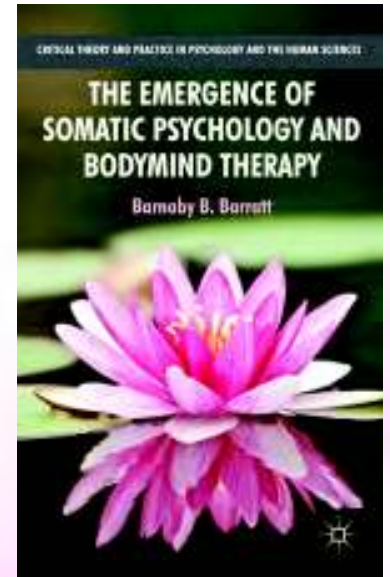
# The Emergence of Somatic Psychology and Bodymind Therapy

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“Within my body are all the sacred places of the world, and the most profound pilgrimage I can ever make is within my own body.”

Saraha, a Trantic adept and Hindi poet, who lived in 8<sup>th</sup> Century Common Era



## Listening to the Voice of our Embodied Experience

I first met Barnaby Barratt in class at Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. He commanded a presence simply by his being. I appreciated his teaching style, his interactional/relational approach, his writing, and his support of my developing processes (and writing). I sensed energy in his demeanor that infused the class, well me, with curiosity and a desire to know more. He challenged me to consider new ways of thinking, to see what was there beyond the boundaries (self and other imposed, conscious and not). I learned much from him then.

So, it came as no surprise that he offers this book as a new way to think about psychology. His work addresses the present status of somatic psychology and its future within psychotherapy and other healing practices. Structurally speaking, the text is divided into three sections: introducing a new discipline; ancient and contemporary sources; and current challenges, possible futures. This is a read-from-start-to-finish book—to skip around the sections

undermines the power of Barratt’s scholarly crafted argument that challenges the status quo while also explaining how it came to be and offering a way out.

According to Barratt, somatic psychology is not yet a “cohesive”, “well integrated discipline” and his intention is to “bring together diverse themes and threads to blend them into the warp and woof of new fabric” (p. 71). Toward this end, he offers two new terms with precise definitions—somatic psychology and bodymind therapy—to distinguish between the discipline (somatic psychology) and the healing practices or applied aspects of somatic psychology (bodymind therapy). His working definitions are:

“Somatic Psychology is the psychology of the body, the discipline focuses on our living experience of embodiment as human beings and that recognizes this experience as the foundation and origination of all our experiential potential” (p. 21).

“Bodymind Therapy is healing practice that is grounded on the wisdom of the body and guided by the knowledge and the vision of somatic psychology” (p. 21).

This text, both by way of organization and the writing itself, ignites readers to join a revolution, to partake in the front lines of an epistemic shift that is said to result in a new appreciation for the human condition, to support genuine healing versus social adaptation, to offer a prepositional revision from practices that are about the body or directed at the body to the intention of the body—“this discipline is a psychology of our experience of embodiment . . .” (p.27), and to stimulate a shift from what Barratt calls the “masterdiscourse of domination”, which has ruled for 400 plus years, to different discourses that “approach the wisdom of our embodiment in an entirely different manner” (p. 36).

Readers will experience the historical/philosophical underpinnings of

multiple, currently held, beliefs, assumptions, and assertions as Barratt positions himself like a lawyer reaching for the crescendo of a well supported argument. There's a look at medieval psychology and its primary concern with issues of the Soul until Watson came along in the 1930s and "damned introspective methods, condemned any preoccupation with consciousness and restricted psychology to the objective study of observable and thus measureable behaviors" the experience of "bodily experience was declared irrelevant" (p. 11). Historical

connectivity (p. 47). He builds his assertions on previous writings (citations are abundant), as he advocates shifting from psychologies that assert self-determination and individual responsibility combined with will power were key to healing (once again denying the wisdom of the body) to the need for a distinctive discipline called somatic psychology. He credits Eugene Gendlin (Focusing), Peter Levine (Somatic Experiencing), Ron Kurtz (Hakomi) and Arnold Mindell (Process Oriented Psychology aka process work) as offering some of the currently most influential approaches

greatly needed conversation on just how do we validate the field of somatic psychology and the healing practices of bodymind therapy while honoring the truth of the work and the theory of the discipline?

**The final section of the book** offers a collection of essays with themes addressing what Barratt considers the major challenges faced by somatic psychology today and which must be met if the destiny of somatic psychology is to be secure (p. 129). This section offers what I consider the most controversial content. Barratt calls on readers to set aside

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accounts between figures such as Wilhelm Reich and Albert Einstein debating the validity of Reich's orgone energy experiments and Freud allegedly "flirting" with the "proposition that some people might not have to comply with the incest taboo in his unpublished correspondence with Princess Marie Bonaparte . . ." add to the intrigue of this field's heritage and a lingering sense of *what if* . . . while Barratt motions for a "(re)turn to the experience of embodiment as the essential starting point and the necessary center of any scientific study of the human psyche" (p. 88).

**Barratt addresses changes** in our collective knowing (based on science and thought) including interconnectedness, temporalities, and ethicality, and how this new awareness must in fact result in an epistemic shift. Healing, Barratt writes, is the mobilization of the life force which underlies the three essential features of bodymind therapy: a holistic discourse, energy mobilization and appreciative

to the field.

**"The human 'I' is foremost a bodily I"** (Freud, 1923, as quoted by Barratt, p. 78).

**I was intrigued by Barratt's challenge** to evidence-based treatments and the current push for evidence-based research to validate the field. The concept that the evidence being assessed is that of treatment efficacy in respect to participants adapting or adjusting to the prevailing social order of what is and what is not acceptable behavior caught me as I read Barratt's words and felt a clutch in my throat—"the truthfulness of our embodiment is not equivalent to the adaptation of our behaviors to prevailing social, economic, cultural and political conditions" (p. 129). He continued to write, "Effective treatments perpetuate the dominant social order. Their impact on the truthfulness of the individual's potential for self-realization is at best undermined, at worst maligned" (p. 129). This stance opens the door for what I consider a

the culturally, socially, politically, and religiously propagated taboos of touch in therapy (including the genitals), nudity during a therapy session, and sexual enactment (sexual surrogate or sacred prostitute). He bases this shift on a lengthy discussion of the incest taboo. He supports his stance offering that sexuality must be respected and safeguarded and that "sexuality is to be understood as the holistic momentum of the bodymind's energy" . . . and healing must address these energies holistically. . . "All healing of the bodymind is a sexual process . . ." (p. 156).

**In summary:** I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in the field of body psychotherapy/somatic psychology/bodymind therapy. It's not an academic textbook as much as a passionate argument guiding readers in their understanding our historical nuances while stimulating a muchly needed shift toward a cohesive, integrated, embodied whole.