

Preface to Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar's
Touching the Relational Edge: Body Psychotherapy

The trajectory along which psyche and soma have traveled over the past century has not been without its perils. Over the almost half century during which I have been professionally involved with it, body psychotherapy has evolved from a little known and/or much denigrated form of psychotherapy to an object of acute interest to mainstream psychotherapeutic circles as well as the lay public (See C. Young, MC Heller and Greene and Goodrich –Dunn)

The Cartesian dualism that dominated much of Western thought over the last couple of centuries formed the backdrop against which psychotherapy, beginning with Freud himself, had to labor. Fearing for the future of the new paradigm he was proposing, Freud in his later years neglected and/or rejected ideas which he had formed earlier on, but which he judged dangerously radical. Among those formulations were the ideas of the importance of the body and sexuality in both the cause and cure of what were then termed “neuroses”.

His brilliant pupil, Wilhelm Reich, refused to abandon those concepts and was thus himself ejected from psychoanalytic circles, first in Vienna, then in other parts of Europe, until he landed upon the ultimately no less hospitable American shores. And, twenty years after Reich’s death, in the process of dissertation research in the US, I found that many of his followers were still afraid to acknowledge their prior connections with him or admit that they even still owned journals and books published while he was alive. In celebrating this introduction to body psychotherapy written in Hebrew and published in Israel, I cannot help but note that at least one if not more of Reich’s followers fled to Israel after his unfortunate incarceration and death in the US in 1957.

Although the relationship between psyche and soma had been frequently explored previously, most notably by Pierre Janet, Reich is generally considered the progenitor of body psychotherapy today. That does not mean that most or even many of the modalities of body psychotherapy, to which you will be introduced in this volume, followed or incorporated his ideas. You will meet many which developed independently of or in reaction to Reich’s ideas.

Especially since the explosion of neuroscientific research in the 1990’s, psychoanalysis and body psychotherapy have begun to approach each other, even if still somewhat warily. Psychoanalysts reading interpersonal neurobiology began to realize that the body held information inaccessible by words alone. In the meantime, body psychotherapists, tired of their own small world, had begun to explore and incorporate ideas and techniques from psychoanalysis, especially and most fruitfully, relational psychoanalysis. Especially in institutes such as the Chiron Center in London, this marriage was being fruitfully consummated.

Somehow, over the course of his training, private practice and considerable teaching experience, Dr. Rolef Ben-Shahar has managed to incorporate many of the most cogent and profound concepts and methods from these two worlds and many more. Readers can look forward to encountering his thoughtful distillation of these worlds, but in an unusually evocative, relational and embodied form. Clinical vignettes and embodied exercises are included in each chapter, thus drawing us into the embodied relational world its author is conveying. As he suggests, “somatic processes become a focal point for the clinician’s curiosity [until]... the body ceases being seen as an object and becomes a pulsating dialogue between bodies-in-relation, revealing themselves to one another.” A one-person psychology has evolved into a dialogical process. “At best, body-psychotherapy is not a set of therapeutic tools but instead a living, pulsating dance of presence and shared becoming – materializing the intersubjective field and embodying it together.”

This book will introduce body psychotherapy to psychologists, psychotherapists, and interested others through an attachment based, object relations, and primarily psychoanalytic and relational framework. The material is approached through three gates: history, theory and clinical practice. In this textbook conceived in the spirit of relational writing, questions are posed and dialogues encouraged. Biological and neuroscientific concepts are offered as metaphors, allowing us to think more deeply about the

bodymind, allowing different angles of understanding, none of which is Truth. It is hoped that this will be the first of many bridges between psychodynamic thinking and body psychotherapy in Israel.

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