

Somatic-Oriented Therapies: Embodiment, Trauma and Polyvagal Perspectives

Edited by Herbert Grassmann, Maurizio Stupiggia,
and Stephen W. Porges

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

Readers can learn about varied perspectives on a common theme when reading an anthology; diverse approaches stemming from a unifying concept create space for exploration and time to deepen conversations. The 32 chapters in *Somatic-Oriented Therapies* blend Polyvagal Theory principles into body psychotherapy as the contributors discuss research, the science of embodying, and embodied practice. From a personal perspective, it was satisfying to see contributions from colleagues I have learned with and from and written articles with. I know their ethics, skills, and clinical professionalism. And they write well.

In this new collection, Sue Carter offers updated insights on her intensive work with oxytocin, Jennifer Frank Tantia explores a new somatic competency for therapists, and Steven Hoskinson and Bach Ho share their theoretical and clinical understanding of Organic Intelligence and its integration for Post-Trauma Growth. Raja Selvam writes about the practice of embodying emotions, and Aline LaPierra discusses the use of therapeutic touch. Pat Ogden co-authored a chapter with Hanneke Kalisvaart on sensorimotor psychotherapy, Betsy Polatin offers her thoughts about our inherent design and connection to wholeness, and Donnalea Van Vleet Goelz explores somatic communication and trauma work via Continuum Movement. The list of authors I have yet to meet sparked my curiosity, motivating me to immerse myself in the text; reading the chapters added to my literary toolbox as I experienced new ways of integrating Polyvagal Theory into clinical settings. Each chapter is a stand-alone article.

About the Book in General

The book begins with Acknowledgements, followed by a Preface written by co-editor Stephen W. Porges. He shares his transition from scientist to unbiased observer to active participant regarding body-oriented psychotherapies and then in conjunction with trauma work. His Polyvagal Theory instigated a shift from focusing on a specific brand or school to a neurophysiological foundational perspective common to many therapeutic strategies (xv). Porges shares insight into his fledging relationships with Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk, and Pat Ogden as they initiated a connection and grew closer together through their curiosity and passion for “understanding the bidirectional communication via the autonomic nervous system of the brain and bodily organs” (xvii). Their work soon eclipsed to include Ed Tronick, Dan Siegel, Norman Doidge, Allan Schore, Diana Fosha, and Louis Cozolino. Their ever-expanding circle of colleagues brought clarity and understanding to the role of the body in trauma. “This book celebrates the important transition within psychotherapy from the constraints of a top-down model to a more accurate view of an integrated nervous system dynamically managing the bidirectional communication between brain and body and between thoughts and feelings” (Porges, xviii).



Co-editors Grassmann and Stupiggia offer a detailed Introduction, sharing their intentions for the book—they are targeting a professional audience clinically immersed in somatic-oriented therapies “as an applied science of embodiment research and treatment” (xxi). The idea for the book was born as Grassmann and Stupiggia discussed their approaches to client work. While trained in different schools of thought, they realized they shared a similar trust in the body. They were relieved to find someone to talk to about how they observed and acted with clients (i.e., their clinical gaze, choice of interventions, and respect for patients’ time and experiences).

They both believed the therapeutic process had to emerge organically; it couldn't be forced. In their minds, "the body was not a means to speed up the therapeutic process or unhinge chronic defenses" (xxvi); instead, it was ground zero—"the constant issue to work on" (xxvi). The body-to-body relationship between therapist and client was paramount.

The book's central message is that therapy will not work unless the client's physiology welcomes and supports the therapist and the interventions (xxv). The chapters in this book emphasize the importance of relational complexity in transforming the client's physiological and emotional regulation—the importance of bodily experience for self-regulation and interaction with others in a social context is crucial (xxi). Therefore, therapists' awareness of their physiological state and clients and the capacity to self and co-regulate are essential tools (xxv).

Research, the Science of Embodying, and Embodied Practice.

Each section introduces new treatment directions and restates well-known methodologies/ approaches. The book aims to develop a more robust framework for future research by examining the scientific rationale for addressing embodiment in quantitative and qualitative research paradigms (xxi). One intention is to reframe psychotherapy—beyond dialogue, memory retrieval, and behavior—to include objective assessments of the client's and therapist's bodily states through reliable metrics, i.e., measuring interoceptive awareness. Conversations about adaptive reactions that may lead to further embodiment, especially in self-agency or autonomy, are included because they are essential in the clinical healing process. Contributor Jacek Kolacz presents his autonomic tracking tool to monitor response to treatment. Sharing measurements of autonomic function with the client turns it into a biofeedback tool.

Robert Schleip writes about the relationship between fascia and emotions, calling fascia the "richest sensory organ of the human body" (pg. xxvii). Writing about nervous system dysregulation as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience Arielle Schwartz supports her belief that trauma treatments need to be within a safe and respectful coregulating relationship (pg. xxvi). Ruby Jo Walker and Emily Newcomer share their work using embodiment to approach resilient states without focusing excessively on cognition. Embodying resilient states with deactivation practices helps "train the nervous system to access the ventral vagal complex, leading to the utilization of neuroplasticity for profound change" (pg.xxvi).

Jane Shaw presents SIMPLE Listening, an approach based on “biodynamic craniosacral therapy and other fields that promote physiological safety and regulation” (pg. xxviii). Marlysa Sullivan outlines four processes of mindful movement via a polyvagal lens. Rabih Lahoud and Herbert Grassmann write about the voice as a complex instrument that allows connection, communication, and expression while also mirroring our nervous system. They write, “When the prosody (rhythm, intonation, etc.) of our voice conveys safety, others are drawn to connect with us and listen to us” (xxix).

Looking at trauma from a neuroscientific perspective, the co-editors note that trauma can overwhelm our neuroregulatory capacity, thus permeating our nervous system. Reframing trauma as a biological, behavioral response can transform our understanding of the consequences of traumatic events (xxii). Vittorio Gallese, Francesca Ferroni, and Martina Ardizzi focus their chapter on “early traumatic experiences that influence the typical developmental course of multisensory integration processes, which can damage basic self-awareness, self-esteem, and intersubjective abilities” (xxv). Herbert Grassmann notes that traumatic events attack our senses, so he focuses on our senses’ interoceptive and proprioceptive processing possibilities and the sensory processing of visual reaction patterns.

“From my perspective it has been a very interesting journey observing therapy moving from words, to proximity, to touch, to neural exercises that enhance feedback leading to greater embodiment and awareness, I am truly grateful to have been a part of the collective journey,” Stephen W. Porges

A Brief Closing

Dr. Porges captured the essence of this collection when he shared, *“I think we have all been on a journey to understand what it is to be a human and how we can optimize our experiences. Cognitive and behavioral orientations that have dominated psychology have been lacking in their ability to craft a useful language to describe feelings.”* (Porges, personal communication).

This collection reflects our journey to language our experiences. There’s more than I was able to share in this brief review. Hopefully, my reflections will encapsulate the overall sense of the content, giving readers a look at what they can expect when they order the book. *Somatic-Oriented Therapies: Embodiment, Trauma and Polyvagal Perspectives* will be available on Tuesday, February 4, 2025.

About the Editors



Herbert Grassmann, PhD, is chairman of the EABP Research Committee and director of the SKT Institute in Nuremberg, Germany, where he resides.



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Stephen W. Porges, PhD, originator of Polyvagal Theory, is a Distinguished University Scientist and founding director of the Kinsey Institute Traumatic Stress Research Consortium at Indiana University and a professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina. He lives in Atlantic Beach, Florida.

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SOMATIC-ORIENTED THERAPIES



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