

THE POWER OF THE MINDBODY: COLLECTIVE SOMATIC LEARNING IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING GROUPS

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Abstract

Embodiment theory posits that learning is not limited to the cognitive functions of the brain, but is the adaptation resulting from multi-system responses to inputs. Somatics offers techniques for increased awareness of response mechanisms, which allows for more controlled self-regulation. This paper explores the benefits of engaging in somatic practicing as a tool for individual grounding catalysed for change in the context of the organizing group the Powerful Moms Who Care. It focuses on the emergence of connected activism through trauma processing, gaining body autonomy, and unconstrained visioning of the future as a result of integrating somatic practices.

Keywords: Embodiment, somatics, community organizing, grassroots

Scholars and practitioners are integrating research from across disciplines to develop theories of embodied learning and connect them with recent research on the healing of trauma, especially through somatic practices. Embodiment theory explains the way that the body and mind work together to facilitate learning. From an embodied perspective, learning is the process of the body receiving external stimuli, responding and orienting itself both internally and to the surrounding environment, and engaging in a process of regulation and adaptation. Somatic practicing offers tools for connecting the conscious, cognitive functions of the brain with the primarily involuntary steps of embodied learning. This paper builds on the limited existing research on somatics in social movement groups, focusing on one community organizing group, the Powerful Moms Who Care. It theorizes the ways somatic practices create deeply layered bonds of power and enable participants to envision social change through individual, embodied transformation.

An Embodied Worldview

Embodiment theory offers an exploration of the ways in which the mind and body integrate to create the lenses through which all beings experience the world. Humans are comprised of a complex network of stimuli receptors and nerves that run through the major organ systems. This cross-system communication results not in one being divided into two parts - the mind and the body - but one mindbody (the "soma") that is constantly and actively engaged with its external environment (Freiler, 2008; Hanna, 1991; Shapiro & Stolz, 2019; van der Kolk, 2014). In addition to the stimuli received through the senses, the body utilizes a network of proprioceptors and interoceptors to orient itself to the surrounding space. In the process, this translation is also sending messages to the whole body. Polyvagal theory posits that a linked series of neural platforms interpret those messages and create a series of cardiac, pulmonary, metabolic, and other responses that unconsciously indicate the need to stay vigilant or ability to relax and engage in social behaviours (Sullivan et al., 2018). From an embodied perspective, human responses and regulation depend on this complex dialogue between the environment, the brain, and the body.

Through this lens, all life experiences are learning. Rather than a world divided into mind and body, embodiment draws on cognitive science to suggest that it is *only* through sensorimotor experiences that beings are able to create image schemas that form conceptual metaphors which inform the ways of seeing the world (Johnson, 2017; Lakoff, 2009; Taylor & Marienau, 2016). The mindbody's interpretation of inputs either reaffirms neural pathways that resulted from similar responses in past contexts or forces adaptation (Eddy, 2016). In contrast to rationalism, the understanding of learning as a constant flow of input and meaning-making frees it from confines of an institution or a particular method of absorbing knowledge. It, instead, honors the wholeness and complexity of beings.

Understanding the soma's wisdom as inextricably linked to its surroundings implies deep layers of interconnectedness. Embodiment understands that the environment to which each organism is adapting is full of other beings that are making their own adjustments (Johnson, 2017). Although neuro-translation of sensorimotor experiences can result in one of an infinite number of conceptual metaphors, for embodiment scholars, those mental models drive behaviours, which ultimately contribute to systemic narratives (Davis et al., 2015; Johnson, 2017; Lakoff, 2009; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Thus, learning is always a collective experience. Just as embodiment honors the fluidity of the soma, the system is viewed as in constant adaptation.

Somatic Learning

Opening the idea of learning to include any instance in which the mindbody is adapting makes it difficult to determine where an individual-level driving of collective change may begin. However, in the context of the patriarchal and rationalistic-based dominant narratives of the United States, somatic education offers a foundational starting point. "Somatics is the field which studies the *soma*: namely, the *body* as perceived from within by first-person perception" (Hanna, 1991, p. 31). Somatic practices invite individuals to slowly introduce movements into their conscious space through a series of body motions that draw the cognitive brain to involuntary motions. "The purpose is to amplify awareness of oneself through awakening the *kinesthetic sense*" (Eddy, 2016, p. 14) and the connection between external stimuli and internal responses. As the illusion of the separateness of mind and body dissolves, the individual becomes more aware of their own participation in the process of regulation. This self-power over regulation is particularly impactful for those experiencing ongoing responses to traumatic events.

When entering the spaces of personal trauma, survival mechanisms inhibit neocortex processing and flood the mindbody with chemicals meant to induce action (van der Kolk, 2014). In somatics, these body-based trauma responses are replaced with intentional movements that calm the autonomic nervous system, allowing trauma survivors to self-regulate as they revisit triggers (Eddy, 2016; Hanna, 1991; Levine, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2014). The ability to stay present provides a sense of agency over the sharing of one's own story and, when these safe self-expressions are conveyed in a group, connections to others' stories have profoundly amplified community-building effects (Christens, 2010; Eddy, 2016). When stories of personal and systemic trauma, are shared collectively, "people improve their sense of well-being [and] many become aware that cultural contexts, personal and communal values and beliefs, and broader environmental features contribute to health, and likewise human values and social structures can contribute to its demise" (Eddy, 2016, p. 233). This increased awareness paired with the sense of agency gained through self-regulation provides a powerful impetus for activism with long-term effects (generative somatics, 2014).

Case Study: Powerful Moms Who Care

Within the embodiment framework of learning and recognizing the power of shared story in structural analysis, community organizing groups offer a context in which somatic

practices may be a powerful tool for creating change. While groups such as generative somatics (2014) provide trainings for leaders from across the United States and grassroots activists that exist within communities grounded in values outside of rationalism already incorporate body-based practices, exploration of integrating somatics in organizing spaces is limited (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Eddy, 2016).

The focus of this paper is within the context of a specific community organizing group located in Salt Lake City, Utah. The Powerful Moms Who Care (PMWC) is a group of low-income mothers working to build healthier and more inclusive communities. PMWC grew out of a survey administered by Crossroads Urban Center to women in food pantries, homeless shelters, and domestic violence shelters designed to gather information on the mothers' experience of poverty. Following the survey, the women were invited to found a group focused on making changes in the areas they identified.

PMWC is a grassroots group comprised of members that have been excluded from institutional power (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). While PMWC engages in dialogue with all levels of policymaking most of the structural changes discussed require engagement with the Utah State Legislature. The homogeneous make-up of the Legislature does not provide an empathetic space for the women. In 2020, the Legislature was comprised of 78% White people, 76% Male, 83% Republican, 86% members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and 54% have an advanced degree (Davidson, 2021; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). The life experiences of the majority of Utah's Legislators do not overlap with those of the PMWC members, resulting in a lack of prioritization of the solutions needed to systemically address barriers to escaping poverty.

Due to the barriers presented to PMWC members by the Utah policy-making landscape, the group's primary approach to change is through building strong, trusting interpersonal relationships. The origins of systematized organizing focus primarily "on public sphere battles between the haves and have-nots" (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). While public confrontation remains an important strategy, employing a relational organizing model allows members to leverage the power they already have in community involvement as their starting point. Rather than taking "the battle" to the public sphere, women-centred organizing makes the private sphere public (Erbaugh, 2002; Garlington et al., 2019; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Due to relational organizing's understanding that learning is whole-bodied, this model honors that different bodies experience different realities. Acknowledging this plurality of truths alongside grounding activism in small dialogues opens participation beyond only those who have the time and self-assurance to engage publicly.

When authentic relationships, rather than loud public statements, are the primary nexus for change, the definitions of power and success shift from outcome-focused to process-based. Power is not viewed as zero-sum, rather it is "limitless and collective" (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 741) and "available to anyone willing to make the effort to build it" (Garlington et al., 2019, p. 28). Power is not gained or lost - it is built in an ongoing dialectic between the individual and the collective. Discovering a deeper understanding of this power dynamic and finding one's role in shaping broader collective narratives is success (Erbaugh, 2002). "The goal of a women-centred organizing process is 'empowerment' - action and reflection that evoke new skills and understandings and, in turn, provoke new and more effective actions" (Stall & Stoecker, 1998, p. 741). In other words, power and success are measured by embodied learning. Incorporating somatic practicing aligns with and intentionally cultivates the core values of the women-centred, relational organizing model of PMWC.

Somatics In Practice: Community Organizing as Learning

Bringing somatic work into community organizing acknowledges the integrated nature of our mindbody experiences that is critical to building sustainable movements. Within the context of PMWC, incorporating principles of somatic practicing has taken the form of

particular meeting structures. Meetings begin with a specific check-in that invites sharing of current emotional states and a self-care action taken since the past meeting. Intentionally creating space to share understandings and practices of self-care has allowed the group to create a list of activities, primarily based in movement, they find beneficial to connect with themselves. To supplement encouragement of the awareness of their own needs and how to address them, PMWC collaborated with a Master's in Social Work student to create a self-care training that includes the anatomical structure and response information that is the foundation for somatic practicing. PMWC also incorporates movement into their meetings. Rather than requiring stationary seating, fluid movement is encouraged. As funding prohibits a fully trained somatic practitioner's involvement in PMWC, a social worker is always present at or nearby the meetings should the physical emotional processing become overwhelming.

The variety of methods employed by PMWC to integrate somatics as key to the connection to self that propels collective change has resulted in furthering the goals of relational organizing. Even within the context of the engagement-challenging pandemic, members have stayed connected to one another, funders have become involved in strengthening the group, and policy-makers have reached out to the group to check-in on new difficulties that may have arisen. While a confluence of factors has contributed to this deeply rooted in-group and external community building, previous research on the individual and collective impacts of somatics points to a positive influence of the integration of mindbody practices. This paper theorizes that three aspects of including space for body awareness within the structure of organizing meetings has been of particular impact: trauma processing, autonomy of body, and opening visioning mindsets.

While breaking through cracks of resistance, activists and organizing leaders confront head-on the oppressive functions of the systems in which they are working. In their exploration of activism, generative somatics (van der Kolk, 2014) offers the reminder that "often those of us moved to do liberation work have been deeply hurt by oppression or violence. This can be a strong calling to movement work, and leave us with scars that need tending" (para. 20). Members of PMWC are or have all been marginalized by economic structures, gendered social structures, and in many cases, by their race, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and the intersection of those identities. Openly encouraging healing through the structure of the organizing group acknowledges that these traumas are present and impact the group's ability to adapt (learn). Empowerment to engage in practices of self-regulation decrease stress chemicals and open the mindbody to learning from a broader range of stimuli and to tap into wisdom already present in the body.

It is still a rare thing for most of us to sit with what we feel, how we feel, the reality that we carry memories and feelings from what our ancestors experienced, and that we carry our current continuous collective trauma together. The pain can open to other feelings, more nuanced and clear. It can begin to make authentic connection and collectivity more possible. (Brown, 2019, p. 276)

Validating the presence of the trauma response works to normalize and prioritize healing as a part of activism. Just as finding a deeper understanding of and connection to the mindbody redefines one's relationship to the present, it also provides a new conceptualization of the future. When an individual holds their own tools for regulation, they can no longer be told what their body should be doing or where it belongs.

In the context of PMWC and other groups resisting strongly dominant opposing perspectives, this autonomy of the body facilitates the confidence to continue bringing the private sphere into the public and demanding change. Similarly, when the mindbody is honored for the learning that it engages in, members are no longer confined by a future that looks like the present. Broadening what is understood as learning creates space for

remembering and integrating multiple ways of knowing into the broader cultural narratives. Grounding solutions in communities who have pragmatic knowledge and encouraging the processing of trauma and experiences from an embodied lens opens the possibilities of a more inclusive and equitable future.

Implications for Further Research

Powerful Moms Who Care began in 2018 and has been actively engaging in somatic practicing since 2019. While some perceived outcomes of integrating mindbody awareness are apparent, this window of time is brief. Embracing an embodied worldview, particularly while continuing to exist in a rationalistic environment, reconnecting to the mindbody, and transforming trauma are long-term and ongoing processes. An extended period of observation and a formal data gathering method, such as interviews with members of PMWC and other groups engaging in somatic practices, would provide further insights into community organizing as a space of embodied learning. Presently, somatic techniques are largely learned through formal networks that require substantial financial means, contributing to exclusion of those with limited resources even from this healing field (Eddy, 2016). Further exploring more accessible methods through which advanced somatic training can be disseminated would benefit the field of organizing and social change.

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